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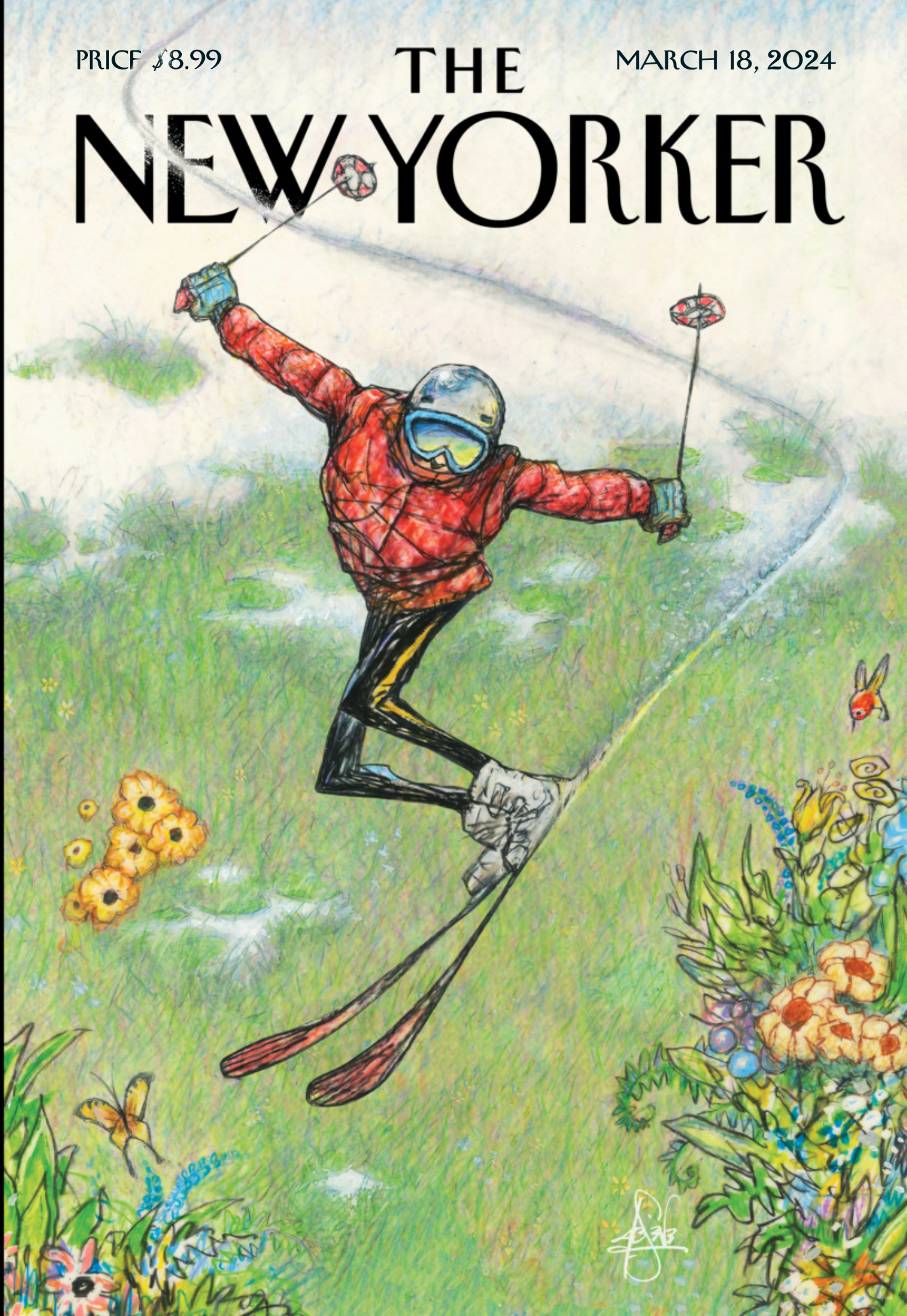
THE NEW YORKER

MARCH 18, 2024



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THE NEW YORKER

MARCH 18, 2024

4 GOINGS ON

7 THE TALK OF THE TOWN
Jill Lepore on the Supreme Court; M.L.B. wardrobe malfunctions; a multiparty debate; Busy Philipps sells; in Vegas, poodles are the show.

ANNALS OF EDUCATION
Emma Green 12 Old School
A new spin on classics-centered curricula.

SHOUTS & MURMURS
Cora Frazier 19 Melanie Ann Donoghue Weds Wordle

PROFILES
Maya Binyam 20 You Tell Me
Percival Everett's philosophical satires.

SKETCHBOOK
Sofia Warren 25 "Office Jargon Pinball"

A REPORTER AT LARGE
Anand Gopal 28 Invisible City
A detention camp for ISIS members—and victims.

LETTER FROM CALIFORNIA
Andrew Marantz 42 O.K., Doomer
Will A.I. extinguish the human race?

FICTION
Joseph O'Neill 52 "The Time Being"

THE CRITICS
A CRITIC AT LARGE
Jill Lepore 57 *John Wilkes Booth and our taste for tales of pursuit.*

BOOKS
Benjamin Kunkel 62 *The Communist utopia of "Chevengur."*
65 Briefly Noted

MUSICAL EVENTS
Alex Ross 66 *Schoenberg's influence.*

THE THEATRE
Vinson Cunningham 68 *"Doubt: A Parable" and "Brooklyn Laundry."*

THE CURRENT CINEMA
Richard Brody 70 *"Love Lies Bleeding."*

POEMS
Amy Woolard 32 "Late Shift"
José Antonio Rodríguez 48 "Men's Sexual-Trauma Support Group"

COVER
Peter de Sève "Downhill"

DRAWINGS *Anjali Chandrashekar, Roz Chast, Victoria Roberts, Maddie Dai, Drew Dernavich, Harry Bliss, Sarah Akinterinwa, Maggie Larson, Paul Noth, Erika Sjule and Nate Odenkirk, Roland High, Ed Himelblau, Ellis Rosen, William Haefeli* SPOTS *Pierre Buttin*

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THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

LETTER FROM THE U.K.

Sam Knight on what medieval Oxford's high murder rate can tell us about the nature of violence today.

THE NEW YORKER INTERVIEW

Rachel Syme talks with Alan Cumming about his approach to performance, aging, and wearing a kilt.

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LEFT: MARTEN VAN CLEVE; RIGHT: CHRIS BUCK / AUGUST

THE MAIL

READING *SANSKRIT*

Michael Ondaatje's "Definition," a poem about reading a Sanskrit dictionary, took me back to the five years that I spent studying the language at the University of Chicago (Poems, February 12th & 19th). I still have my Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English dictionary (which I assume is the one that Ondaatje is referring to), and I flip through it from time to time because its entries are like poems unto themselves.

Studying this ancient language has kept me curious for more than thirty years. Some Sanskrit poems use a literary device of intended secondary meanings, and that makes reading them a fun and reflective experience. When Ondaatje writes, "Wherever you turn / definitions push open a door," he evokes the variegated ways that people communicate; his poem reminds us that, if we work to decipher and embrace multiple meanings, we can enter new worlds.

Anna Hammond
New York City

HIGH *SUPPLY*

As a longtime California cannabis cultivator, both before and after decriminalization, I found the comments by New Yorkers in Jia Tolentino's piece about legalization strikingly similar to those that Californians have made over the years ("In the Weeds," February 26th). Eli Northrup, a public defender who held the first meeting of the Conditional Adult-Use Retail Dispensary program, said that New York is not basing its program "on any existing model." Yet choosing not to study the successes and failures of other states is to risk repeating the latter.

On both coasts, candidates for licenses have faced far too much red tape; at the same time, the legalization of weed, which added taxes and jacked up the price per ounce, gave a shot in the arm to the illicit economy, which offers lower prices. Albany and Sacramento would have done well to turn to experts in the underground market for help navigating the specifics of marijuana cultivation, distribution, and sales. State and local leaders seem to have greatly underestimated the time, energy, and creativity necessary to bring a formerly prohibited activity to Main Street and to Wall Street.

Jonah Raskin
San Francisco, Calif.

Tolentino, in her otherwise informative article about the chaotic opening of New York's market for legal marijuana, risks perpetuating reefer madness when she writes, "Several products advertised a truly terrifying potency: one bag of peach gummy rings from the California brand Smashed supposedly contained two hundred and fifty milligrams of THC per gummy, enough to send a devoted stoner like myself to the emergency room." I also found two hundred and fifty milligrams to be too much for one gummy. So I cut it in half.

William deJong-Lambert
New York City

BURNED AND BANNED

Claudia Roth Pierpont, in her article about the role of books during wartime, mentions a U.S. Office of War Information poster showing a photograph of a book burning with the caption "THE NAZIS BURNED THESE BOOKS . . . but free Americans CAN STILL READ THEM" (Books, February 26th). That photograph appears to depict books looted from Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Science, known for its pioneering research on sexuality and its advocacy for homosexuals, transgender people, and women. Today, in many states, fewer and fewer "free Americans" have unrestricted access to similar books.

Michael Ward
Costa Mesa, Calif.

•

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Photo: Grants from The Trust—made possible by donors like you—help the nonprofit Bronx is Blooming.

GOINGS ON

MARCH 13 – 19, 2024

What we're watching, listening to, and doing this week.

Around 2009, **Kwikstep and Rokafella,** a married team of veteran hip-hop evangelists, were noticing that dancers like them were becoming less and less welcome in bars and clubs. So they started hosting Behind the Groove, a semi-regular dance party for freestyling. The idea has been to promote social exchange across many forms—popping, breaking, house, waacking, hustle, and yet-to-be-named variants—without the heat of competition. But the event tends to attract participants with top skills and powers of invention who can't help but make the temperature rise. On March 18, the party comes to the spiral-ramped rotunda of the Guggenheim Museum, courtesy of "Works & Process." Ticket holders can watch in wonder or enter the circle and flash some moves.—*Brian Seibert*

TARANITA COSTALES

ABOUT TOWN

ART | To appreciate AARON, an early artificial-intelligence program whose drawings and paintings are the subject of the exhibition **"Harold Cohen: AARON,"** at the Whitney, you first might want to accept that it never made good art—images of flowers, tentacular hands, and sour little faces, but never good art. Think of it instead as a Rube Goldberg machine, reimagining doodles as dense jumbles of steps and if-then rules. The humbler the output, the more comically intricate, even poignant, the processes seem. The most arresting pieces on display may be diagrams from the notebooks of AARON's creator, the artist and programmer Harold Cohen, which suggest a frazzled, almost fatherly delight in teaching a machine what most children already know.—*Jackson Arn (Whitney Museum; through May 19.)*

OFF BROADWAY | **"The Ally,"** a new play by Itamar Moses, directed by Lila Neugebauer, foregrounds a well-intentioned Jewish Israeli American writing professor, Asaf (Josh Radnor), who's asked to sign a wide-ranging social-justice petition by Baron (Elijah Jones), a Black student whose cousin was shot to death by police. Though uncomfortable with language condemning Israel's "apartheid" and "genocide" of Palestinians, Asaf agrees. Anyone following the recent real-life upheavals on college campuses can guess what ensues. Asaf is accused of complicity in antisemitism by a Jewish student; then, after voicing concerns about anti-Israel sentiment to Baron and others allied with him—who say that American racism and Palestinian oppression are related—Asaf is accused of insulting both Arab and Black people. Moses's writing, like Radnor's and Jones's performances, is powerfully empathetic, but audience members, however well-intentioned, may fatigue amid all the speechifying.—*Dan Stahl (Public Theatre; through March 24.)*

OPERA | In Verdi's magnificently ungainly **"La Forza del Destino"** ("The Force of Destiny"), three main characters who are bound by a murder in their youth keep running into one another, despite efforts to remain apart. The coincidences can be comical, but the music is colossal, expressing not only fatefulness but trauma. Mariusz Treliński's new modern-dress production for the Met moves uneasily between reality and suggestion before finding lucidity. In Act IV, Leonora (the extravagantly endowed soprano Lise Davidsen, through March 16), Don Alvaro (the stentorian Brian Jagde), and Don Carlo (the gripping Igor Golovatenko) converge at an abandoned, bombed-out subway station. Having reached the figurative end of the line, they assume a tragic grandeur, abetted by the conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin, as they collide one last time.—*Oussama Zahr (Metropolitan Opera House; select dates through March 29.)*

DANCE | The dance selections of the annual **Flamenco Festival** start, at City Center, with Ballet Nacional de España's "Invocación," in which a huge cast of thirty-eight dancers sets flamenco within a broader context of Spanish dance. In a solo show, "La Leona," the petite and precise Olga Pericet celebrates the guitar while toying with surrealist props and costumes. And, for this year's Gala Flamenca, the lineup includes Manuel Liñán—who convincingly commands traditionally female attire such as the long-tailed *bata de cola* dress—and the self-taught young firebrand El Yiyo.—*Brian Seibert (March 8-17.)*

HIP-HOP | In 2018, the Philly rapper **Tierra Whack** forced her way into the frame with the forward-thinking début "Whack World," a whimsical audiovisual experience that traversed not just varied avant-pop soundscapes but the folds of her brain. Inside the album's minute-long songs, Whack introduced a fun-loving and audacious persona capable of tongue-twisting lyricism, bubbly displays of melody, and bite-size storytelling, all with the theatricality and presence of a character actor. Each song had its own distinct music video, and they all link together to make a short film. She's issued smaller projects since, but this month she returns with a long-awaited follow-up, "World Wide Whack," poised to reassert herself as a polymath who doesn't take herself too seriously.—*Sheldon Pearce (Webster Hall; March 15.)*

MOVIES | Richard Linklater has often fictionalized his boyhood in Huntsville, Texas, in such films as "Dazed and Confused" and, of course, "Boyhood"; now he scrutinizes it in the documentary **"Hometown Prison,"** one of his most passionate and personal works. The town is centered on a prison complex in which the state of Texas carries out executions. Many Huntsville residents work in the prison, and many of the town's daily activities take place in plain view of its walls. In the documentary (one of three in the HBO series "God Save Texas," based on the titular book by Lawrence Wright, of this magazine), Linklater probes his own deep-rooted and troubling connections to the prison in poignant interviews—including with people once incarcerated there, corrections officers, and his own longtime friends, who help him break burdensome silences on camera.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on Max.)*

TABLES FOR TWO

Misipasta
46 Grand St., Brooklyn

Few people in New York City understand pasta the way the chef Missy Robbins understands pasta. After years overseeing some of the city's most electrifying pasta restaurants, she's amply proved her mastery of the medium: the expressivity of a noodle's form, sensual or zany; the harmony of marrying a shape with exactly the right sauce. There is artistry, too, of course, in the act of cooking pasta; Robbins might boil a dried, extruded noodle so that it still has a filament of hardness running through it, whereas she'll let her hand-cut specimens slump with jellyfish languor. There's no better place to experience Robbins's touch than at Lilia, her chic Williamsburg restaurant, but in its eight years Lilia has remained impenetrably booked.

When you can't get into Lilia, you might end up at Misi, Robbins's lower-key spot on the other end of Williamsburg. I have a great time when I close my eyes at Misi, but the room feels sterile, at odds with the emotional warmth of the food. So I feel a bit like Goldilocks at Robbins's newest spot, Misipasta, which opened last summer, also in Williamsburg. It's a market, selling fresh pastas and sauces, as much as an all-day restaurant, with a focussed eat-in menu of hearty snacks that include an enormous green salad and a deep-fried *mozzarella in carrozza*—a kingly grilled cheese. There are about twenty counter stools, and the air smells like Parmigiano and butter.

Despite a dozen or so shapes of pasta available in the to-go case, Misipasta offers only two on the dine-in menu, but two is enough. The spaghetti, subtle and satisfying, is cooked just to the stern side of al dente, then tossed with garlicky butter emulsified with the cooking water and sprinkled with shaved bottarga and crisp bread crumbs. Luscious cappelletti are filled with a heady mixture of Parmesan, ricotta, mascarpone, and prosciutto, dressed simply in butter. It's the sort of pasta you want to shovel into your mouth, but their size and heft force you to slow down.

I worry a little bit about what will happen when the secret of Misipasta gets out. But, when the weather gets warmer, the beautifully appointed back yard will reopen, nearly doubling the seating capacity. Have a slice of crispy *farinata*, a lacy-edged chickpea-flour pancake aromatic with rosemary. Have an artichoke sandwich, one of the city's great secret sandwiches—an enormous mess of grilled artichoke hearts and hot chili peppers, barely held together by oozing provolone cheese. Bring home a pound of pasta—frilly lumache, or long, flat tubes of paccheri—and a jar of thirty-clove sauce. You won't make pasta nearly as good as Robbins's—even with the same ingredients, some things just have to get all the way into your bones—but it doesn't hurt to try. *(Dishes $14–$24.)*

—Helen Rosner

PICK THREE

The staff writer Rachel Syme shares current obsessions.

1. This past year, I have made an active effort to disentangle myself from the vice grip of social media. I no longer use Twitter (excuse me, X), and I'm weaning myself off of Instagram. Still, one social network continues to bring me joy: **Letterboxd.** (I'm @rachsyme over there!) I was late to join the site, where people rate and review films, revealing their taste, their wit, and their curatorial skills. But now I love browsing strangers' reviews and reading the idiosyncratic lists that people put together. A recent favorite: Zackawhat's "Dude is havin a rough night." (The films include "After Hours," "Eraserhead," and "Die Hard.")

2. On March 22, Katie Crutchfield, the singer-songwriter who performs as Waxahatchee, releases **"Tigers Blood."** I can't stop listening to the album's lead single, "Right Back to It," a dulcet, banjo-backed ditty recorded with the singer and guitarist MJ Lenderman, which leans heavily into country twang. Consider your summer of glamorous yee-haw vibes officially kicked off.

3. I highly recommend Nicole Newnham's 2023 documentary, **"The Disappearance of Shere Hite"** (now streaming). It follows the life of the feminist writer and activist, who wrote one of the best-selling books of all time—"The Hite Report," a study of human sexuality, from 1976—and became a national celebrity for her research on the female orgasm before being maligned by male critics and living in self-imposed exile. The film is a fascinating portrait of a woman who was brave enough to tackle misogyny head on and paid a dear price for it, including her erasure from popular history. Watching it made me feel grateful, agog, and enraged.

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THE NEW YORKER

The Runaway Princesses

FROM In the Dark

Why do the women in Dubai's royal family keep trying to flee? A four-part podcast tells the story of a powerful sheikh and the women who risked everything to escape him.

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THE NEW YORKER

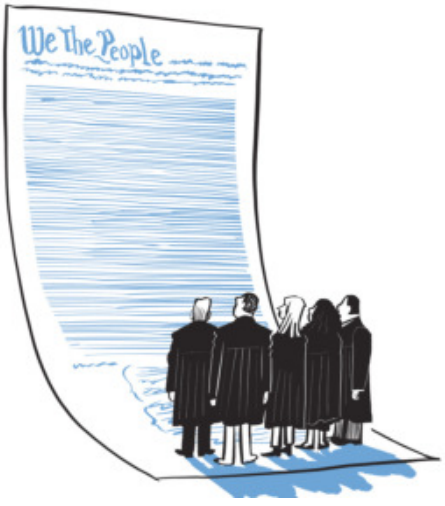
THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES

There's more than one way to skin a Constitution. Here are two: a court might base a decision on the original intention, meaning, and public understanding, the "history and tradition," of a constitutional provision, or it might base a decision on a consideration of the consequences. Ordinarily, a judge might apply both these and other methods, but a strict originalist might argue that the jurisprudence of originalism is fundamentally opposed to the jurisprudence of consequentialism—that it's best to heed the past and damn the consequences. During oral arguments at the Supreme Court in Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, for instance, Justice Samuel Alito asked about origins ("Can it be said that the right to abortion is deeply rooted in the history and traditions of the American people?"), and Justice Sonia Sotomayor inquired after consequences ("When does the life of a woman and putting her at risk enter the calculus?"). Alito wrote the majority opinion, declaring that no right to an abortion can be found in the Constitution's history and tradition, and that therefore "the Fourteenth Amendment does not protect the right to an abortion." Sotomayor joined a dissent that denounced "the majority's refusal even to consider the life-altering consequences" of its decision.

This term, the tables turned. In Trump v. Anderson, the Court agreed to review a decision by the Colorado Supreme Court to strike the former President's name from that state's Republican primary ballot. That court had found that Donald Trump, owing to his role in the events of January 6th, had been disqualified under Section 3 of the Fourteenth Amendment, which prohibits people who have sworn an oath to the Constitution and then engaged in an insurrection against it from holding office. Maine and Illinois also determined that Trump had disqualified himself.

There are strong arguments against disqualifying Trump, but none involve the historical record: the evidence of history supported affirming the Colorado Supreme Court's decision. (I and the historians David Blight, Drew Gilpin Faust, and John Fabian Witt made this argument in an amicus brief.) During oral arguments, Justice Sotomayor asked about origins: "History proves a lot to me." Justice Alito worried about outcomes: "The consequences of what the Colorado Supreme Court did, some people claim, would be quite severe." So did Chief Justice John Roberts, who asked Jason Murray, the lawyer representing Colorado voters, what he'd do with what "would seem to me to be plain consequences of your position?" Alito asked Murray "to grapple with what some people have seen as the consequences of the argument that you're advancing." Posing one hypothetical after another, Alito asked, "Then what would we do?"



Last week, the Court issued a messy 9–0 opinion. The three liberal Justices reportedly square-pegged a partial dissent into a bitter, for-the-good-of-the-country concurrence with the six conservatives, to reverse the lower court. The decision relied on arguments about potential consequences, including "conflicting state outcomes." "An evolving electoral map," for instance, "could dramatically change the behavior of voters, parties, and States across the country, in different ways and at different times." The Court stamped its feet: "Nothing in the Constitution requires that we endure such chaos."

Chaos may yet come. But, now that the originalists on the Court have recast themselves as consequentialists, will they be willing to revisit Dobbs, in light of its consequences, which include a crisis in fertility treatment in the wake of the Alabama Supreme Court's recent decision that embryos kept in storage are children? Or might the Court now reconsider its interpretation of the Second Amendment?

Until very recently, the Second Amendment, known as "the lost amendment," hardly ever came up. In

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

a unanimous opinion in 1939, the Court ruled that it protected the right to bear arms only as part of a well-regulated militia. Then, beginning with D.C. v. Heller, in 2008, and continuing down through New York State Rifle & Pistol Association v. Bruen, in 2022, the Court codified a new, individual-rights reading that it described as "original," and devised history tests (including a "historical-analogy" test) that any effort to curtail gun violence must pass in order to be deemed constitutional. Without the fealty to originalism that these cases demanded, there could be no Dobbs—no impossible test for abortion to fail.

Historians protested that the Court's interpretation of the Second Amendment was wrong and its tests preposterous. In Bruen, a case involving the question of where New Yorkers can and cannot carry guns, which was argued four weeks before Dobbs, oral arguments included groping for an eighteenth-century equivalent of a football stadium. Pressed by Justice Elena Kagan, the lawyer for the petitioner admitted the limits of historical analogies, given that, for instance, you can't base denying felons the right to own guns on any eighteenth-century law, since, at the time, many crimes were capital crimes. Felons weren't banned from carrying guns; they were executed. Justice Stephen Breyer later tried to intervene: "Even following Heller and following the history, which I thought was wrong," he said, he wondered which way the Court could possibly rule that would not result in "a kind of gun-related chaos." But why should anyone follow Heller or Bruen, whose reasoning attempts to defy the very passage of time? By that logic, the constitutionality of I.V.F. turns on identifying the eighteenth-century equivalent of a frozen embryo.

If the Court is now interested in consequentialist arguments, here's one: in the past quarter century, more than three hundred thousand American children have experienced armed civilians attacking their schools. Last year, there were six hundred and fifty-six mass shootings in the United States. Four out of five murders and more than half of all suicides in this country involve a gun. Gun ownership is rising, and so is political violence. For nearly a century, beginning with the earliest public-opinion surveys, Americans have consistently supported safety measures and curbs on gun ownership. Since 2008, the Court has thwarted them.

"I was proud to be the most pro-gun, pro-Second Amendment President you've ever had," Trump said at the N.R.A.'s annual meeting last year. His Administration gutted gun regulations and purged more than half a million background checks from a national database. Trump has already attempted to overturn one election. If he should lose in November, and, refusing to concede, incite an armed insurrection, then what would we do? The past holds no answers.

—Jill Lepore

AT BAT

I SEE LONDON, I SEE FRANCE

Sheer is hot, sheer is in. At Paris Fashion Week, which just wrapped up, everyone was going see-through: Margiela, Valentino, Armani, Dior. Saint Laurent had such a preponderance of sheer, and such a lack of undergarments, that Vanessa Friedman, the *Times*' fashion critic, demanded, "Enough with the boobs."

Nowhere has sheer made as much of a splash as in the summer collection of what might be called the House of Major League Baseball. Baseball fashion has been stale. What was once avant-garde (the pantaloon, the stirrup, the male stocking, the chubby old manager inexplicably kitting up in full uniform) has become passé. Boldness was needed. The league delivered, when spring training opened, with new uniforms designed by Nike and manufactured by the apparel company Fanatics. "2024 MLB season brings latest on-field innovation to forefront with Nike Vapor Premier Jerseys," the league declared. In a lot of ways, the new uniforms look like the old ones. The designers say they are cooler, stretchier, and faster-drying. Embroidery is on its way out. Press-on patches are in. But the most daring feature is that you can see the players' underpants. The new thin fabric is completely sheer.

As with a provocative runway show, some people were scandalized. Innovation was apparently not the only thing the designs brought to the forefront; a few players, caught bending over, or just sitting down, displayed silhouettes of genitals which were remarkable for their clarity and detail. One player reportedly resorted to buying his own pants at Dick's Sporting Goods. Perhaps there was a deeper artistry at work. Was this a subversion of the male gaze? A sly reference to the nude, oil-slicked competitors of the ancient Olympics? Shrinkflation? The M.L.B. commissioner, Rob Manfred, predicted the start of a trend. "I think after people wear them a little bit, they're going to be really popular," he said.

But just how popular? Could see-through baseball pants become the must-have garment of 2024? A few fashion experts convened to review the spring-training look book.

Isaac Mizrahi, designer: "I first started going to baseball games when I was in my twenties and I had a boyfriend who loved the Yankees. Part of the reason I liked to go is they're not badly shaped, these gentlemen. It's like going to the ballet. If you like bodies—and I like bodies—to some extent, you're kind of excited when you first hear something like this. But this? This has a creep connotation. It's none of our business."

Stan Herman, designer and business-uniform specialist: "Sheer is the No. 1

thing on the runway, but that doesn't translate to men who are sliding into second base."

Robin Ghivan, Pulitzer Prize-winning fashion critic for the Washington *Post:* "I think a designer could play around with the idea of baseball uniforms, but the point of the aesthetic experiment would be to see either how you could improve upon it or exaggerate elements that make it distinctive. This just creates a very weird diaper-like shadow underneath these pants, because of the way they have to wear these uniforms tucked in."

Mizrahi: "I bet they must have had to commit to a lot of yardage. You're talking about a *lot* of yards, darling. So it's not a little mistake."

Herman: "You might get away with a sheer neckline, but waist down? No way. And white? No. That's one of the Ten Commandments."

Mizrahi: "Sheer goes in and out. You get tired of people being so careful, and you want to go fabulous. Maybe give it a minute and it'll catch on."

Herman: "I think Miuccia Prada did it beautifully the season before. They were throwing an envelope of sheer over solids."

Mizrahi: "You think about Saint Laurent in the seventies. He did suits with sheer blouses. They were completely sheer, you saw through them, and it was fine. It was very chic. . . . If this were an intentional thing, I would be, actually, pleased and happy. Like, they were so unself-conscious about their bodies that they were able to show them off. Baseball, it's an elegant sport. I always think of them twinkling around the diamond. They twinkle! I was always a Steinbrenner nut because he made them shave, he made them cut their hair."

Ghivan: "The sheerness is the least of the problems here. They look so uptight. Why are the shirts tucked in? They look like they're going to some strange baseball office, not onto the diamond. And are those belts? What's going on there? Why are there belts when they're playing sports?"

Did the experts have any style tips?

"You could easily do an undergarment workaround," Ghivan said. "You should wear something that matches your skin tone."

"You could put long johns on," Herman suggested. "Or just smile and just let the world know what your shape is." He added, "I will tell you, a whole bunch of new people will be going to the games."

—Zach Helfand

"One day, son, all these skyscrapers that we built for no reason and lie empty will be yours."

• •

SPOILER DEPT.
UNRIGGED

Two Thursdays ago, while Joe Biden and Donald Trump were heading back from the southern border, five spryer Presidential candidates were at a soundstage in Hell's Kitchen, waiting to debate the real issues. "The libertarian guys are in this greenroom, the socialists are across the hall in hair and makeup, and I believe Jill Stein is taking a nap in here," an employee of Free & Equal, the nonprofit producing the debate, said. "We invited Cornel West and Bobby Kennedy, too, but they were holding out for a big-name moderator."

Larry King moderated a Free & Equal debate in 2012, but this time the duties fell to Caitlin Sinclair, of One America News Network; Christina Tobin, the founder of Free & Equal and a longtime activist against the two-party system; and Jason Palmer, an entrepreneur and a longshot candidate himself. (Last week, somehow, Palmer beat Biden in the American Samoa caucuses, in which a total of ninety-one votes were cast.) Jill Stein—the Green Party candidate in 2012 and 2016, and the debate's front-runner—walked out of her greenroom, refreshed, wearing a pantsuit. "We need to talk about crushing inequality, and militarism, and the decline of the American empire," she said in the hallway. The audience filed in: a few dozen of the candidates' personal guests, plus a handful of diehard fans of multiparty democracy. The cameras were rolling; the event would be livestreamed on Rumble and broadcast later on C-SPAN. A singer named Marie Tatti warmed up nearby, preparing to sing the national anthem. "The candidates aren't even out yet, and apparently we've already got a heckler," she said.

The libertarian guys were indeed all guys—twelve or so, in a greenroom, standing around a TV tuned to "Wheel of Fortune." Two of them, Chase Oliver and Lars Mapstead, were candidates vying

for the Libertarian Party's nomination; the others were former candidates, podcasters, entourage members, or all of the above. "Lars and I were just in North Carolina debating each other," Oliver said. "Tomorrow we fly to Indiana for a convention, then a debate in Pennsylvania, then another one in New Jersey. Libertarians love to debate, especially against each other." Oliver, who describes himself as "armed and gay," wore a lapel pin inscribed with the Starfleet insignia. "Yes, I'm a Trekkie," he said. "After being a libertarian, it's the second most nerdy thing about me." Mapstead wore a lapel pin of his own design, bearing the words "Unrig the System." "That's my message," he said. "The system's rigged. It's the one thing everyone can agree on." In the 2016 election, Jill Stein got more votes in decisive swing states than the differential between the votes for Trump and Hillary Clinton; in the 2022 Georgia Senate race, Oliver got eighty-one thousand votes, forcing a runoff. "They call us spoilers," he said, scoffing. "It's the system that's spoiled."

The socialists were Claudia De la Cruz, of the Party for Socialism and Liberation, and Jasmine Sherman, of the Unicorn Party. "I'm also running for the Green Party nomination, even though everyone acts like *she's* got it in the bag," Sherman said, casting a withering glance in the direction of Stein's greenroom. "I'm not here to be chummy with the other candidates. I'm here to win."

"The Trump and Biden and Clinton people, it's all a game to them," De la Cruz said. "They vacation together, they wage war together." Her campaign manager sat next to her, monitoring social media and eating gummy worms.

"Bernie didn't actually want to win," Sherman said. "If he did, he wouldn't have run as a Democrat."

"The Democratic Party is where all dreams and aspirations go to die," De la Cruz said. She wore a red dress and a matching kaffiyeh. "Kanye tried to wear one of these, but he didn't know what he was doing," she said. A stagehand brought the candidates backstage, where they waited for their cue. Two fans, Frankie Lozada and Gabriel Cornejo, stood nearby, hoping to take selfies with the debaters. "We're also candidates for President," Lozada said.

"I want to get the basics out of the way," Sherman said, in the opening statements. "I'm fat, I'm Black, and I'm a socialist running for President of the United States—I would recommend that you listen to the candidates that have a plan to put money in your pocket *tomorrow*." Stein stood center stage. Sherman and Oliver agreed that Cop City, a proposed police complex in Atlanta, should not be built; all five candidates agreed that Julian Assange and Edward Snowden were political prisoners; the only real disagreement was about regulating nuclear power plants. "I have thirty-seven pieces of policy on my Web site to unrig the system," Mapstead said, in closing. "Our republic is cracking, and it is unfunctional."

Sherman put on a face mask and walked offstage, glad-handing with audience members: "Lovely to meet you. I'm Jasmine Sherman, the next President of the United States. Jasmine like the flower, Sherman like the tank."

—Andrew Marantz

SPLITSVILLE
THINGS

Three years ago, the actor Busy Philipps and her husband, the filmmaker Marc Silverstein, decided to call it quits. The separation process involved ironing out a co-parenting agreement (they have two kids, Birdie Leigh, fifteen, and Cricket Pearl, ten) and making new living arrangements. But they procrastinated on one order of business: dealing with their stuff. A storage unit was brimming with the remains of their life together.

They decided to sell most of it and donate a portion of the proceeds to abortion funds. On a recent chilly Saturday, a long line formed in front of the Cure Thrift Shop, in the East Village. Inside, shoppers poked through such items as kitchen appliances, picture frames (forty-five dollars each), and a Wii Fit set. A long table held stacks of Philipps's 2018 memoir, "This Will Only Hurt a Little." The two-day "divorce sale" had been announced on Vogue.com. Guayakí Yerba Mate signed on to sponsor the event, and helpers handed out complimentary

Marc Silverstein and Busy Philipps

cans. A soundtrack of upbeat music played on speakers.

Philipps, wearing a sheer magenta prairie dress under a crocheted granny-square vest, worked the room, energetically cheerleading potential purchases. Silverstein, with a salt-and-pepper beard and wearing a hoodie, stood apart from the action, with both hands shoved inside his pockets.

Caissie St. Onge, who co-hosts the "Busy Philipps Is Doing Her Best" podcast with Philipps, watched the scrum. "I'm just emotionally supporting," she said. "We're taping some stuff." She gestured toward a small camera crew across the room.

Taking a break, Philipps explained her rationale. "It wasn't like we were being avoidant," she said, referring to the years that had passed since her marriage ended. "O.K.—maybe we were."

She went on, "Once you live without something for three and a half years, and you open up a box and look at it, you're, like, 'Wait, do I need that?' Like, my child's first tennis racket? I mean, she doesn't play tennis anymore. She's not going to Wimbledon."

Philipps offered a rundown of some nearby merchandise. "All of these frames, we took the personal photos out of them, but they were all in our home. This table was in Marc's house when we first met"—heavy, round, brown, marked twenty-five hundred dollars. It didn't sell. "It's from a ship."

She moved from the "Marc" section of the sale (flannels, dark wood) to the "Busy" section (floral tops, lots of pink). A framed star certificate (fifty dollars) was propped up on a dresser. "Someone

bought me a star at some point," Philipps said. "I think it was a fan." She pointed out items from her daughter's former bedroom. "This was Birdie's headboard for a minute," Philipps said. The bed went for three hundred dollars.

Philipps looked at an arrangement of housewares—a set of crystal glasses, a Le Creuset saucepan (seventy dollars). "Marc and I had so many parties," she said, then paused. "And, you know, those days aren't these days."

Also up for grabs: one-dollar champagne flutes the couple had accumulated as hosts. One shopper came in specifically for Philipps's wedding veil. Philipps let her have it for free.

Across the room, Silverstein stood quietly near the checkout table. "I'm a less nostalgic person than Busy," he said. "It was—I wouldn't say 'enjoyable,' but it was a nice walk down memory lane for me to go through a lot of this stuff." He said that they had no problems agreeing on what to sell. "We still like each other," he said. "So it was respectful."

He continued, "Just seeing who is buying what is really nice. Not so much the clothes, 'cause, like, whatever. But that candleholder or those weird fake lemons we had." He added, "It's also funny to be, like, Wow, someone is buying *that*?"

He looked over at a red enamel cachepot that he'd had as a bachelor (fifty dollars). "I was, like, twenty-nine and had my first house, and I had gotten a friend of mine to help me decorate it," he said. "I didn't know you need, uh, *things*. There are just *things* around a house."

Later, when he met Philipps, the cachepot made an impression. "When Busy came over, after one of our first dates, she was, like, 'Oh, he has *things*. He's an adult.'" He smiled at the memory.

—André Wheeler

LAS VEGAS POSTCARD
DOG'S LIFE

The private party for the soft launch of the Poodle Room—a members-only club at the new Fontainebleau resort in Las Vegas—was lavish even by Vegas standards. On the eighty-ninth floor, the very top of the hotel, attendees sat beside long, curved windows overlooking the Strip, the lights of the city spread out below like a sequinned scarf. Servers offered "caviar pillows," Janelle Monáe d.j.'d from a disco-ball-shaped dais, and hunks of truffles the size of Ping-Pong balls were arrayed in gold bowls. Rumors circulated that Jennifer Lopez and Ben Affleck would show up, likely in the secret back room. (They did.)

And yet none of this could compete with the presence of a white show poodle named Josephine. As the mascot of the Fontainebleau Las Vegas, Josephine appears on the resort's Instagram account and occasionally turns up in the flesh (or in the fur?) to greet guests, giving the impression that she lives there, like Eloise at the Plaza. (Plans are in the works for a series of "Josephine at the Fontainebleau" children's books.) At the grand opening gala, in December, Josephine upstaged Tom Brady, Cher, Lenny Kravitz, Bryan Cranston, Aaron Paul, and more than one Kardashian.

In reality, Josephine has been played by several different poodles. At the Poodle Room début party, the eight-year-old Mochi (named for the Japanese rice dessert) alternated with the two-year-old Patrón (named for the tequila). The hotel has also bought a five-month-old puppy named Fifi—an understudy in the wings, currently in training for the role. At the party, both Josephines wore sparkly collars. No one seemed to notice or care that Patrón is actually a boy dog. His owner, Javier Torres, a former adult dancer, who wore a tux, said that Patrón is often mistaken for a girl because he looks like one: "He is a very poodle-y poodle."

Partygoers were offered the opportunity to take photographs with Josephine, as though with a mall Santa. Mochi pulled photo duty, staring straight ahead without expression as guest after guest perched on the arm of the blue velvet chair where she sat, while a photographer snapped away. Nearby, two resort employees dressed as poodles, in papier-mâché snouts—one white, one black—stood sentry. "We're accessories," one said glumly.

Torres, whose business is called My Pride Poodles, had brought Patrón to the hotel early, for primping. He has bred standard poodles for two decades and owns twenty-two of them. He tried to discourage partygoers from patting Patrón's head. "It takes me four hours to wash that dog and dry it," he said.

On the edge of the club's cavernous main room, Torres fluffed Patrón's bangs with what looked like a Mason Pearson brush. "How did your dog become the star of the show?" a woman in a black evening gown asked. He explained that Patrón was crowned Winners Dog at the Poodle Club of Las Vegas Specialty—a local dog show—last year, and will compete again at the end of March. The poodle also earns between three hundred and a thousand dollars an hour for an appearance. "You don't understand how many people know who he is on Facebook," Torres went on. "They message me, 'Oh, my God, is he available for stud service? Does he have any puppies?'"

Patrón posed for a while on a cream-colored couch, then started yapping. "He's had enough," the woman in the black gown said. Torres attached a leash to Patrón's rhinestone-studded collar. "He has to go potty," he said. He led the dog through the club's marble foyer, where a flock of young women—atmosphere models who had been flown in for the occasion "from the night-life scene in L.A. and New York," their own handler said—were waiting for their signal to enter the party. As Patrón trotted past, the models collectively fluttered like a swarm of starlings.

Upon returning, Patrón spent the rest of the evening at the bar, his front paws resting on its edge, as though waiting for a drink. (The menu featured cocktails named after poodles who have won the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show: Puttencove Promise, Fontclair Festoon, Cappoquin Little Sister.) Women gathered around, petting and cooing. "He's been to a lot of bars," Torres said. By around 1 A.M., Patrón was getting fussy, so Torres draped the dog over his shoulders, the way a rancher might carry livestock, and ferried him through the crowd.

—Amanda Fortini

ANNALS OF EDUCATION

OLD SCHOOL

Have the liberal arts gone conservative?

BY EMMA GREEN

Hundreds of classical schools have opened in the United States in recent years.

The first thing you notice when walking into the middle-school classrooms at Brilla, a charter-school network in the South Bronx, is the sense of calm. No phones are out. The students are quiet—not in the beaten-down way of those under authoritarian rule but in the way of those who seem genuinely interested in their work. Sixth graders participate in a multiday art project after studying great painters such as Matisse. Seventh graders prepare to debate whether parents should be punished for the crimes of their minor children. Another group of sixth graders, each holding a violin or a cello, read out notes from sheet music. A teacher cues them to play the lines pizzicato, and they pluck their strings in unison.

Brilla is part of the classical-education movement, a fast-growing effort to fundamentally reorient schooling in America. Classical schools offer a traditional liberal-arts education, often focussing on the Western canon and the study of citizenship. The classical approach, which prioritizes some ways of teaching that have been around for more than two thousand years, is radically different from that of public schools, where what kids learn—and how they learn it—varies wildly by district, school, and even classroom.

In many public schools, kids learn to read by guessing words using context clues, rather than by decoding the sounds of letters. In most classical schools, phonics reign, and students learn grammar by diagramming sentences. Some public schools have moved away from techniques like memorization, which education scholars knock as "rote learning" or "drill and kill"—the thing that's killed being a child's desire to learn. In contrast, classical schools prize memory work, asking students to internalize math formulas and recite poems. And then there's literature: one New York City public-high-school reading list includes graphic novels, Michelle Obama's memoir, and a coming-of-age book about identity featuring characters named Aristotle and Dante. In classical schools, high-school students read Aristotle and Dante.

Classical education has historically been promoted by religious institutions and expensive prep schools. (Many classical schools have adopted the Harkness method, pioneered by Phillips Exeter Academy, in which students and teachers collectively work through material via open discussion.) More recently, powerful investors have seen its potential for cultivating academic excellence in underserved populations: the Charter School Growth Fund, a nonprofit whose investors include the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Bloomberg Philanthropies, has put millions of dollars into classical schools and networks.

Republican politicians have also smelled opportunity in the movement, billing its traditionalism as an antidote to public-school wokeism. Ron DeSantis, the governor of Florida, has railed against "a concerted effort to inject this gender ideology" into public-school classrooms, and has celebrated the influx of classical schools in his state. Tennessee's governor, Bill Lee, proposed launching up to a hundred classical charter schools statewide, touting their mission to preserve American liberty. As more conservatives have flocked to classical education, progressive academics have issued warnings about the movement, characterizing it as a fundamentally Christian project that doesn't include or reflect the many kids in America who aren't white, or who have roots outside this country. The education scholar and activist Diane Ravitch recently wrote that classical charters "have become weapons of the Right as they seek to destroy democratically governed public schools while turning back the clock of education and social progress by a century."

Stephanie Saroki de Garcia, who cofounded Brilla, acknowledged that "classical education is often seen as a white

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ILLUSTRATION BY RICARDO TOMÁS

child's education." This is partly because of the curriculum: "You're talking about teaching the canon and mainly white, male authors," she said. It's also because these schools have been embraced by white Republicans who have the resources to keep their children out of the local school system. And yet Brilla is not rich, or white, or discernibly right-wing. Many students are English-language learners and immigrants, from Central America and West Africa. According to Brilla's leaders, nearly ninety per cent of their students meet the federal requirements for free or reduced-price lunches. Saroki de Garcia purposefully opened the first Brilla school in the poorest neighborhood of the Bronx, which has a large population of Latino Catholics. (Brilla is secular, but it offers a free Catholic after-school program.) The students I met were nerdy and earnest, and far from young reactionaries. Angelina and Fatumata, two eighth graders, told me that they started a book club to read about racism in America; one recent pick was "Passing," the 1929 novel by Nella Larsen, set in the Harlem Renaissance. Brilla's leaders intentionally take a wide view of the canon, and of which texts are valuable to study. "We try to make that connection for our students, who are mostly Black and Hispanic, with faces they can see themselves in," Will Scott, the principal of one of Brilla's middle schools, said.

Brilla's administrators were careful to note that the network isn't "classical" but, rather, "classically inspired." This distinction is partly practical. Although teachers invoke Latin root words when they're teaching kids English, for example, students don't take Latin as a subject. But it also seemed like the school's leaders wanted to put some distance between themselves and the broader classical-education movement. "If we say 'classical school,' that has a connotation," Scott said. Still, it's telling that the schools have found traction by marketing themselves as "classically inspired" in the South Bronx, where voters overwhelmingly prefer Democrats and the college-graduation rate is among the lowest in New York City. During the lead-up to Brilla's launch, in 2013, volunteers posted up outside a local McDonald's to pitch families on enrolling. "We billed it as, This is what the élite get," Saroki de Garcia told me.

Everyone I met at Brilla seemed aware that their school is an implicit rejection of traditional public schools, but not in the way one might expect. Although America's public-school wars are often depicted as fights over race and gender ideology, there are also a lot of parents who think their local schools just aren't very good. Brilla's two middle schools are in New York City's School District 7, where, last year, less than a third of sixth graders were proficient in math or in reading and writing. Angelina, a recent immigrant from St. Croix, said that most of her friends "go to a public school, and they talk really poorly about their school." Fatumata added that "they don't have what we have," such as Algebra I classes for middle schoolers. "The schools around us are, frankly, failing," Scott, the principal, told me.

There are many charter schools that aim to address the problem of low achievement, often through an obsessive focus on test scores and discipline. Brilla cares about both of these things, but what sets it apart is its mission. Classical education is premised on the idea that there is objective truth, and that the purpose of school is to set kids on a path toward understanding it. This principle is often framed in philosophical shorthand—classical educators love talking about "truth, beauty, and goodness," which can sound like a woo-woo catchphrase to the uninitiated—and it's paired with an emphasis on morality and ethics. Brilla students attend a character-education class every morning, where they talk about how to live out the different virtues reflected in the texts they read. As Alexandra Apfel, an assistant superintendent for Brilla's middle schools, said, "We're building students that are not just going to be academic robots but moms and dads someday."

In 1947, Dorothy Sayers, a motorcycle-riding Anglican crime writer, delivered a paper at Oxford titled "The Lost Tools of Learning," in which she bemoaned the state of education. "Do you ever find that young people, when they have left school, not only forget most of what they have learnt (that is only to be expected) but forget also, or betray that they have never really known, how to tackle a new subject for themselves?" Young people do not know how to think, she argued, because they've never been taught. They may have been introduced to subjects, but not to what it means to learn.

In the face of this contemporary problem, Sayers proposed an ancient solution: the revival of a medieval teaching format called the trivium, which divided learning into three stages—grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric. The first stage is about mastering basic skills and facts; the second teaches students to argue and to think critically about those facts. By the third stage, they're ready to express themselves in essays and oration. This model of education, cultivated by Renaissance thinkers and the Catholic Church alike, was common among European élites for centuries.

Sayers's essay built on a long-standing debate about whether this kind of education made sense in a rapidly changing, industrialized world. Classical-education advocates often point to John Dewey, the early-twentieth-century progressive reformer, as the bête noire who marginalized their preferred form of schooling: "There was a war going on between the progressive and the classical educators, and the progressives won in a rout," Andrew Kern, the founder of the Center for Independent Research on Classical Education, told me. Although this story is perhaps overly simplistic, Johann Neem, a historian at Western Washington University, said, it's true that Dewey and other progressives thought that the old ways of education were inadequate for modern students. These progressive reformers planted the seeds of two trends. The first was shifting the focus of school toward appealing to the interests of the child, rather than transmitting ancient knowledge and wisdom, which these reformers considered élitist. ("Academic and scholastic, instead of being titles of honor, are becoming terms of reproach," Dewey wrote.) The second was a utilitarian impulse—some scholars thought that the purpose of education was to train workers. They did not believe that every student needed to read Plato.

In the late nineteen-seventies and early eighties, classical education reëmerged as a pushback against these trends. A handful of schools built around

Sayers's ideas launched in Idaho, Massachusetts, Kansas, and Indiana, independently of one another. They were all Christian, but of different flavors—two had Catholic roots, one was ecumenical, and one was evangelical. Doug Wilson, the pastor who founded the evangelical school, in Idaho, later started a conference for Christian parents and educators who were interested in creating their own schools. This was the beginning of the Association of Classical Christian Schools, or A.C.C.S., which has since grown into a network of more than five hundred and forty schools, most of which are Protestant and use aspects of the trivium model. Even in Christian circles, Wilson is a polarizing figure—he promotes a theology that prizes strictly traditional gender roles and has made inflammatory comments about race relations. But the classical movement has expanded into something much broader: there are more than two hundred Catholic classical schools, which call their approach "Catholic liberal education," along with a growing number of classical charter schools with no religious identity. The movement is diverse, in part because classical education has boomed among homeschoolers, who run the gamut from serious athletes to kids with learning differences to conservative Christians. These homeschooling families "like the idea of a traditional, rigorous education that really demands a lot out of a child, and that is also responsive to them," Susan Wise Bauer, the co-author of "The Well-Trained Mind," a popular guide to classical homeschooling, told me.

The notion of a standardized curriculum, let alone a shared value system, no longer exists in most American public schools. Proponents of classical education argue that any student can find value in the same timeless texts—Augustine and Austen, Chaucer and Chesterton—regardless of that student's race, religion, or class. James Baldwin once said that reading Dickens "taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who had been alive." Classical-education advocates want kids to read Dickens and feel that same connection.

Though classical schooling might have once been the education of élites, the modern version has egalitarian potential. In Texas, enrollment in classical charter schools is growing most quickly among Asian and Hispanic students. In Arizona, a charter-school network called Espiritu, which mostly serves immigrants, recently overhauled its curricula to be more classical. And yet, perhaps inevitably, the movement has also felt the gravitational pull of the culture wars. With many classical schools focussed on moral formation and civics—and, incidentally, white male authors—this educational mode is primed to be co-opted into something that's not just traditional but reactionary. The architects of contemporary classical education believed that, by reaching into the past, they could build a better future for American education. Today, many of the people embracing classical education are more interested in running away from the aspects of progressive schooling they fear.

Pete Hegseth, the perfectly coiffed Fox News host, sits on a stage in Franklin, Tennessee, a small city south of Nashville. To his left is a giant American flag. He is here taping a segment of his Fox Nation special "The MisEducation of America" before a live audience of parents who are disturbed by what they've encountered in local public schools. "We are fighting the battle of fires," Cameron Sexton, the speaker of the Tennessee House of Representatives, tells Hegseth: "You're talking about C.R.T."—critical race theory—"you're talking about books in the library," which might incorporate ideas about gender or sexuality. Sexton goes on to explain that the only solution is for people to enroll their children in classical schools, like he did with his own daughter, where students won't be spoon-fed ideology. "There's nothing more powerful than for an individual to have the ability to think and decide things for themselves," Sexton says. "That's how you stop the government from intruding on your life."

When we spoke, Hegseth acknowledged that his interest in the movement "started as a reaction against" what he saw as progressive indoctrination in typical public schools. He has since reoriented his life around classical Christian education; in 2022, he and his wife moved outside Nashville to send their kids to such a school. He also understands the appeal of the model to a politically conservative audience. "What our viewers are looking for is a back-to-basics approach," he said, one in which Christianity is "front and center."

Hegseth is close with David Goodwin, who became the president of A.C.C.S. in 2015. Under Goodwin, the number of A.C.C.S. schools has more than doubled. Goodwin and Hegseth recently co-wrote a book called "Battle

for the American Mind," in which they argue that Marxists "have taken full control of America's education system." Wokeism, they explain, is driven by a vision of education that prizes "control of your identity, being accepted for who you are, finding adventure, and creating your own path in life." Arguably, these are contemporary buzzwords with roots in century-old progressive ideas—that knowledge and virtue are not objective and external but, rather, subjective and internal, to be discovered as one develops one's sense of self. Hegseth and Goodwin believe that, by focussing students' education on the civilizations that flowed out of "the convergence of Greece, Rome, and Hebrew cultures," America can recapture the norms it was built on. "We are the new radicals, the new revolutionaries," they write.

As part of this revolution, Goodwin and the A.C.C.S. have been promoting classical education overseas. They see Africa, in particular, as fertile ground: over the last twenty-five years, Christian missionaries and pastors have planted classical schools in a dozen countries. This past fall, I went with Goodwin to Nairobi for a conference hosted by the Rafiki network, which runs schools in ten English-speaking African countries and publishes a curriculum used by dozens of other schools. Goodwin lives in Boise—it was his first time in Africa, or south of the equator, for that matter. Wearing a slightly baggy blazer and a yellow tie, he stood in front of roughly two hundred people in a dim auditorium near an Anglican cathedral.

The obvious question of the day was why Goodwin's version of classical education would be compelling to people living outside the West. "It took me about twenty hours from where I live in the States to get here," Goodwin said. "Fifteen hours in, I started crossing over the territories that most developed the West. I crossed Macedonia. The plane flew down through Greece and near Alexandria, in Egypt, and then down the Red Sea, with Mt. Sinai on the left." In Nairobi, he argued, they were far closer to the history of the West than he was back at home. "This is where Christendom grew up," he said. He noted that the word "Western" is often associated with colonization. Goodwin framed his role not as one of domination and takeover but, instead, as an emissary from a possible future. "We're in a pitched battle in the United States," he said, "between the powers of light and the powers of darkness." His prayer was that the audience wouldn't let progressive education take root in their country.

After the lecture, Goodwin confessed to me that his earlier argument—that Kenya is closer to the origins of the West than America is—was a bit of a stretch. Despite nearly three-quarters of a century of colonialism in Kenya, he said, "I don't think it's dominantly a Western culture, because Greco-Roman philosophy is not deeply ingrained." In his view, no place on the African continent is currently part of the West. Even Alexandria, which was one of the seedbeds of Western thought and philosophy in the centuries before and after Christ, is now dominated by Islam, which Goodwin does not see as part of the West. Although Christianity might have roots in Africa, it moved westward, toward Europe and the United States, and that's the intellectual tradition Goodwin is focussed on. It is "existentially evident that Western culture is the most influential in the history of man," he had told me a few weeks earlier. Goodwin thinks that Kenyans should learn songs and stories from their country and continent, along with the history of Greece and Rome. But, he said, "we don't buy into the cultural philosophy that all cultures are equally valuable and good."

The next day, I got in a car with Theodore and Crystal Wilson, the heads of Rafiki Classical Christian, a school on the outskirts of Nairobi that educates kids aged three to eighteen. The Wilsons, a Black, missionary couple, taught at classical schools in America before moving to Kenya, in 2022. We wove through chaotic traffic on our way out of central Nairobi—speeding minibuses taking men to work, throngs of people crossing the street seemingly at random. Churches were everywhere: Israel New Creation House, Abundant Glory International Ministries. Soon, we arrived at the Rafiki compound, originally the summer home of Kenya's first President, Jomo Kenyatta. Behind a tall rock wall, the campus was a lovely oasis: ibises flew around acacia trees that were scattered among a series of small, squat buildings with red tile roofs, each housing a couple of grades.

Theo Wilson was a Navy chaplain, and his military background showed. When he and his wife arrived in Kenya, they cultivated a morning-assembly tradition—a highly orchestrated performance of students marching along an outdoor basketball blacktop. Wilson, wearing a canvas safari hat, a bow tie, and a sweater vest, stood before the children, who lined up in neat rows with their hands behind their backs. "Why are we in school today?" he asked. "To glorify and enjoy God," they answered, following a script provided by the A.C.C.S.

In the classrooms, the trivium was everywhere. Preschoolers were memorizing a verse from I Samuel. Third graders took turns reciting lines from "The Fisherman and His Wife," a fairy tale published by the Brothers Grimm. Some aspects of Kenyan culture were present: on the wall of a second-grade classroom, the Kiswahili alphabet was written out next to the English one. "We go to great lengths to feature their art, their music, but also historical figures of the African diaspora," Theo Wilson said. Still, there was a jarring emphasis on Western civilization. In one classroom, the history of music was laid out according to European eras—Renaissance, Baroque, Classical, Romantic—and the walls were decorated with portraits of white European composers. Later, we visited the library inside Rafiki's teacher-training college. One wall was covered by a twenty-three-foot-long time line of world history first published in 1871, starting from Adam and Eve. It featured a sketched map of the world that portrayed Europe and the Middle East in colorful detail, whereas the whole of the African continent south of Carthage was a giant black mass. Each civilization had its own line, tracing its evolution through the centuries. By the time of the birth of Jesus, any reference to African history had disappeared.

At the conference, I met a Kenyan woman named Melissa Wakhu, who wore

large, geometric earrings and styled her hair in shoulder-length locs. She had worked as a consultant for Deloitte before choosing to homeschool her four children full time using Classical Conversations, a classical-homeschooling curriculum that's popular in America. Her kids have received the full classical experience, from learning literature and Latin to memorizing the names of Greek and Roman gods. "I've watched what it's done to my children, in terms of opening up their minds, their vocabulary, their thinking, their empathy," she said. She even works for Classical Conversations part time, as its representative for East Africa.

And yet, as time went on, she started feeling unsettled. Her children would listen to classical music, "but then my kids started asking, 'Are there no African musicians and composers?'" she said. One lesson suggested that children go outside and collect maple leaves, which are nowhere to be found in Nairobi. Her tenth grader was working through a unit on the American government and economy. "They have to memorize a well-written speech and present it, and what they were memorizing was the preamble to the Constitution," she said. "So I have these African, Kenyan children standing and reading out to me, 'We the People of the United States . . . ' For me, that was a conflict." Wakhu has now written and published more than a dozen kids' books featuring Kenyan scenes and African heroes, to fill what she saw as a gaping hole in the classical resources available to her family.

Throughout the conference, American speakers kept bringing up Augustine, who lived and wrote in what is now Algeria. "He's northern Africa, which has a completely different experience than the rest of us," Wakhu told me. The implication, in suggesting that Augustine is the closest thing to an African thinker that the classical tradition has to offer, is that "there was no philosophical thinking" in places like Kenya, Wakhu said. "It's a challenge for this group of foreigners to try and come and convince us of something that is beautiful, but is also Western."

Plenty of Americans are also skeptical of the classical-education movement's narrow emphasis on the West. In 2021, Angel Adams Parham, a sociology professor at the University of Virginia, became the board chair of the Classic Learning Test, or CLT—an SAT alternative often taken by classical-school students and homeschoolers. Parham came to classical education by the same path as many others: when her oldest daughter was getting ready for school, Parham looked at the available options and wasn't satisfied, so she started homeschooling. Just like Wakhu, Parham found Classical Conversations, which set her on her own intellectual journey. "As I'm reading the Republic for the first time—I must have been in my forties—I'm thinking, Why have I never read this?" She had an undergraduate degree from Yale and a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and yet, she told me, she had never been exposed to these foundational texts.

Parham, who is Black and studies the history of race, came to believe that the Western canon is deeply intertwined with the Black intellectual tradition—after all, Malcolm X read the classics in prison. Black figures have also fundamentally shaped the Western tradition. Parham recently led a reassessment of which authors appear on the CLT; one figure who got added was Olaudah Equiano, a freed slave who was part of the movement to end the slave trade in Britain and wrote an influential autobiography. For the most part, though, Parham has found that "the mainstream of the movement" is hesitant about efforts to widen the aperture of classical education: "Their sense is, There's a list of texts, and these people are not on the list." The result tends to be a Eurocentric notion of the West. "You have to take a very sharp scalpel to the world to carve out Africa, the Middle East, and Asia in order to get the version that they want to call 'Western' and 'classical,'" Parham argued. Homer talks about Ethiopians. Herodotus tells tales from Asia and Africa. Aquinas engaged with Islamic scholarship. But "we're not educated in that tradition," Parham said.

I first encountered Parham in September, when the CLT's board of advisers held a summit in Annapolis, Maryland, at St. John's College. Men and women in brightly colored preppy dress milled around before the first activity of the day: croquet lessons. The scene, complete with a nearby lemonade table, felt like the most extreme possible caricature of what people who venerate the classics would do for fun. (Then again, the next day's activity was sailing.) The impresario of the croquet field was Jeremy Tate, the C.E.O. of the CLT. He schmoozed his way through the small pack of players in a blue summer suit, his blond bangs carefully tousled with gel. He was riding a high: last fall, Florida's board of governors agreed to let students use the CLT to apply to state universities and scholarship programs, significantly increasing its number of test-takers. (That number is still minuscule compared to those who take the SAT.)

As one might expect, the CLT is heavy on classic texts—one practice exam uses excerpts from the Epic of Gilgamesh and the Federalist Papers to test reading comprehension. But, despite the exam being promoted by conservatives like DeSantis, the sharpest critique that the CLT's founders make is not about politics but about high-stakes testing—a critique typically associated with progressives. Tate told me that the College Board, which makes the SAT, is cynical and career-focussed. "The point of education was always the preservation of civilization," Tate said. "It was the cultivation of virtue." To Tate, this includes the kind of learning that can never be fully measured by a test, such as an appreciation for poetry or theatre. According to Tate, policymakers in other red states are interested in following Florida's lead by offering the CLT. But when Republicans ask if he wants them to promote the exam, he told me, "we're trying to say, 'Not really,' because your being a champion of this would further politically hijack it."

Tate represents a common figure in the classical-education world: a dispositionally conservative guy who is also adamant that classical education is not right-wing. He acknowledged that the movement has a natural constituency on the right, among parents who are panicked about wokeism. But "it's not enough to get some of the ideas out that you consider toxic," Tate said. "You need a bigger vision for education." Besides, the G.O.P. has its own utilitarian tendencies when it comes to schooling, which are out of step with classical education. "It wasn't long ago that you had Marco Rubio on national television making fun of philosophy majors," he said. "It's a weird moment, where this kind of education would be championed on the right."

The right's suspicion of identity politics has also made conversations about diversity difficult. One of the questions that Parham and the other CLT board members considered during their reassessment of the authors on the test was whether more nonwhite or non-male thinkers should be included, prompting one board member to complain that "the CLT was going woke." Parham expressed frustration with this kind of attitude. "There are people who really love classical education, but they are really hungry for 'How do we weave together a more diverse tapestry?' Does it all have to be Greece and Rome and European authors?" she said. "That is very different than saying, 'We just want diversity for diversity's sake.'" Parham thinks that kids, and especially kids who are not white, would benefit from learning about the crossroads of the Mediterranean back before modern notions of racial hierarchy existed. But it's challenging to find an audience for this argument in America's polarized culture. "Left academia is not helping us," she said. "People are pushing back against some of the extremes of that. They are fleeing to classical education, unfortunately, thinking it's going to be a safe space. But it's all very wrongheaded."

The tricky thing about truth, beauty, and goodness is that, for all their supposed timelessness and objectivity, not everyone agrees on what is actually true, beautiful, and good. As the classical-education movement grows, it must contend with the fundamental question of pluralism: Does the movement's notion of truth keep out not only certain texts but certain children?

Doug Wilson, the A.C.C.S. founder, who is often credited with repopularizing classical education, is a difficult figurehead for a movement that wishes to be inclusive. He maintains a "Controversy Library" on his blog, which includes an account of the outrage over his now retracted pamphlet "Southern Slavery as It Was," in which he described slavery as "producing in the South a genuine affection between the races that we believe we can say has never existed in any nation before the War or since." (Wilson says the pamphlet was retracted because of citation problems.) He believes that it is not possible to have a truly classical education without Christianity. This is a common view, even among leaders of the Society for Classical Learning, a more moderate alternative to the A.C.C.S. that deëmphasizes "culture war" in favor of "culture care"—inviting people into the movement, rather than policing its borders.

"He's a shelter dog. We don't know much about his past."

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For people like Susan Wise Bauer, the co-author of "The Well-Trained Mind," the idea that there's something fundamentally conservative or Christian about classical education is ahistorical and myopic. A specific type of person tends to dominate the classical speaker circuit, she told me: the "theo bro," which she defined as a "conservative Protestant-theology fan who likes to smoke cigars, drink whiskey, talk theology, and has a beard." She sees herself as speaking for a much broader, more diverse constituency, including Jews, Muslims, atheists, and "liberal, pinko, Marxists" who love classical education. If she and Doug Wilson were discussing the classical approach, she added, "we'd probably both agree on the importance of teaching grammar, but I don't know that we'd have much in common, other than that." Kevin Hall, the C.E.O. of the Charter School Growth Fund, told me that he sees a particular hunger for classical education among parents who are not religious, and who may find comfort in a public charter school that can partner with them in developing their kids' character.

By law, classical charter schools are secular, because they are publicly funded. The largest network is Great Hearts, which has twenty-eight thousand students across its schools in Arizona, Texas, and Louisiana, with fifteen thousand more students on its waiting lists. Daniel Scoggin, one of the Great Hearts cofounders, told me that it wasn't hard to arrive at a version of classical education that was appropriate for a public charter school. "You take out the theology," he said. "You keep a focus on the Greeks, keep a focus on the classics, the great American tradition as the capstone to the classical story." Doug Ducey, the former governor of Arizona, who helped push through a significant expansion of charter-school funding, told me that he sent his sons to Catholic school, "but if Jack, Joe, and Sam Ducey were in kindergarten today I would be trying to enroll them in Great Hearts."

Although networks like Great Hearts and Brilla have attracted many families, some parents find the ideas associated with the movement alienating. The Archdiocese of Portland is one of many Catholic dioceses that is slowly incorporating elements of classical education into its schools. But this transition has

become mixed up with sensitive issues of identity, including the place of gay and trans kids and families in the Church. The archbishop, Alexander Sample, recently released guidelines on "dealing with gender issues," instructing Catholic institutions, including schools, not to support gender transitions in any way. At least one group of parents protested, but they say their concerns were ignored.

"When I look at those who are promoting the classical-education model, there have been a lot of red flags," Charlene Hannibal, one of the parents, explained. "The main thing that concerns me is the lack of acceptance for trans youth and L.G.B.T.Q. families and children." Elias Moo, the Archdiocese's new superintendent, told me, "It does no one any favors if we try to sugarcoat or water down what the Church teaches." This includes the faith's understanding that humans are created as male or female. "We will honor the primacy of parents to such an extent that we're willing to recognize when a parent says, 'This isn't the best environment for our child,'" he said. In classical schools, inclusion isn't necessarily the highest virtue.

There can be a sense of urgency in the classical-education world—a feeling that whole generations have been lost, and that the next must be saved. In January, I visited a new classical school on the Upper East Side where that feeling was acute. The school is called Emet Classical Academy; *emet* means "truth" in Hebrew. Plans for Emet had been in the works for over a year, but after Hamas attacked Israel on October 7th Emet's leaders decided to open the school on an accelerated timeline. Two mothers—both well-dressed, professional-class women—took me on a tour of the Conservative synagogue where, beginning this fall, students will learn about their place in the Western tradition. It will be a contained world of study; classroom windows look out onto a brick wall.

"For me, this is really about antisemitism," one of the moms, who asked not to be named, told me. "After October 7th, it became abundantly clear that unless my child is in a safe space, like a Jewish school, there is opportunity for antisemitic rhetoric." The other mom said that she worries about sending her kids to college unprepared for an onslaught of criticism of Jews, and of Israel: "Whatever the antisemitism du jour is in five years, I realized over the last few months that it's my responsibility as a Jewish parent to make sure they're prepared to respond to it." So much of New York City schooling is about helping students understand their identity, she added, "and that's all excellent. But most schools don't include Judaism or Zionism in those aspects that they seek to develop in the kids."

This is the pitch that Emet is making: through a classical education, students can become confident in themselves as Jews, and as Americans. As much as the project is intended to be countercultural—a fix for what's wrong with modern schooling—it also mirrors modern schooling's obsession with developing kids' sense of identity. Both moms were eager to point out that the school will be Jewish but not religious, which they see as a plus. Abraham Unger, the head of the school, told me that every morning the students will say the Pledge of Allegiance and sing "Hatikvah," the Israeli national anthem, but there will be no mandatory prayers, and kids will not be expected to learn how to participate in synagogue services. Most of the families who have expressed interest in Emet are not from traditionally observant backgrounds, and their kids are not coming out of religious Jewish day schools. They're parents like the two moms I met. This moment in history has shaken something in them. They're looking for roots.

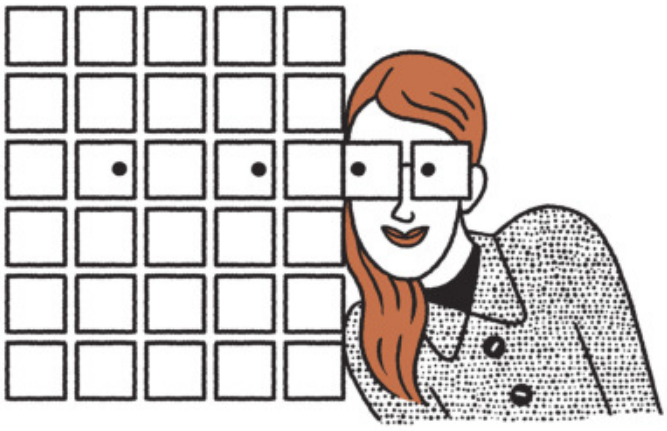
Emet is a project of the Tikvah Fund, a prominent Jewish foundation chaired by Elliott Abrams, a neoconservative fixture who served in the Reagan, George W. Bush, and Trump Administrations. Eric Cohen, Tikvah's C.E.O., told me that he hopes Emet will eventually be a model for dozens of schools around the country, including existing Jewish day schools. He also wants to start a Jewish classical-education version of Teach for America.

"The Jews were summoned in history to have a kind of purpose," Cohen said. "Jews brought certain ideas and ways of understanding reality into the world: that humans are both created and commanded. That we're covenantal beings that have a responsibility in shaping history. That there's a moral vision of life that's articulated in the Jewish tradition that has wisdom and relevance for all human beings." To him, the story of Jewish civilization is fundamentally Western, and the story of Western civilization is fundamentally Jewish. "The West is Greco-Roman culture recast through a Jewish lens," he said. The goal of Emet is to cultivate students "who can enter the world with that civilizational vision—those habits of mind and heart and leadership and character that classical learning at its best can shape—for deeply Jewish purposes."

So far, Cohen said, the school has been welcomed into the Christian-dominated classical-education movement. The movement's leaders don't necessarily agree with Cohen's interpretation of history or his high view of Jewish texts, though. I asked David Goodwin why students in A.C.C.S. schools don't learn Hebrew—the language of the Old Testament, and the lingua franca of the rabbis who, according to Cohen, helped shape the West. "The Hebrew tradition is one of authority and law, which we study," Goodwin said. "But the emphasis is on the Greek and Roman tradition, which is one of persuasion and logic. There's more there to study—in the Greek, it's a deeper pool." Plus, he added, Hebrew is too hard for most high schoolers to learn.

Nothing is more classical than Plato's allegory of the cave, which is really a story about education: how human beings emerge from ignorance and discover truth. In the story, humans are prisoners chained up in a dark chamber, facing a wall. They believe that the shadows on the wall represent the world. Then one day a prisoner makes his way out into the light. He is blinded by the sun, but eventually his eyes adjust. He goes back into the cave to persuade the others to come out. But his eyes no longer work in the darkness; all the prisoners see is a blind man, and they assume that leaving the cave is pointless.

There's a sly tension in the allegory. Plato clearly believes that it's better to live in the light and know the truth. But he also acknowledges that a person can be blinded in two ways, both as they're emerging from the cave and again as they're returning to it. It can be difficult to know which direction leads to the truth. Even Plato's fanboys might get lost on their way. ♦



MELANIE ANN DONOGHUE WEDS WORDLE

BY CORA FRAZIER

Melanie Ann Donoghue, thirty-two, of Westchester County, New York, was wed on Saturday to Wordle. The bride, a project manager at a pharmaceutical-advertising agency, met Wordle, a New York *Times* digital game, in 2022. "All my friends were telling me he was great," she said. "They'd been trying to get me into him for a while. But I'd just gotten out of a long relationship and wasn't in a place to commit, especially not to a five-letter-word game."

On the Washington Square Park bench where the couple was being interviewed, Donoghue admitted that her type was more "built." "I like bald guys, actually," she said. "All my exes before Wordle were bald human men."

The bride's father is a partner at the New York-based law firm Green & Ipswich, and Donoghue said she was nervous about introducing him to Wordle. "My parents are pretty traditional—high-school sweethearts and all that," she said. "I thought, Are they going to judge me for dating someone I met online, who's only capable of communicating through letters that *Times* readers type onto a gridlike interface?"

But upon meeting Donoghue's father and her mother, a homemaker and a physical therapist, Wordle put them at ease. As soon as he and Donoghue walked into the midtown restaurant Joe Allen, he said, "HELLO."

The bride graduated from Middlebury College, where she was on the Quidditch team. She later attended business school at Yale. The groom, a browser-based word-guessing game, traces his lineage to the software engineer Josh Wardle, of Brooklyn, originally from South Wales. He sold Wordle to the New York Times Company in 2022 and did not attend Saturday's Hudson, New York, nuptials, which featured a five-layer gluten-free cake and the games Spelling Bee, Tetris, and Sudoku, all present virtually.

"I was disappointed," Donoghue said, in Washington Square, about Josh Wardle's absence. "I mean, I know Wordle doesn't have a typical relationship with his father, but I think I held out hope that his dad might show up, even though we never got his R.S.V.P. or his dinner request for 'chicken,' 'vegetarian,' or 'no food.'" The bride wore her mother's Vera Wang wedding gown for the ceremony and the reception, and QR codes on every seat provided guests with a link to subscribe to the *Times* for full games access.

The marriage was officiated by the bride's college roommate, Jennifer Reger, of Santa Barbara, California, who introduced Donoghue to Wordle. After Donoghue read her vows, Reger handed her a phone in a hand-carved cedar case, made especially for the occasion. Donoghue typed in, "IDOOO." She later acknowledged that the ceremony, featuring Mason jars full of ranunculus lining the aisles, was more spiritual than legal. Donoghue vowed that, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, she would never give up her daily streak. She declared, "I've never loved any living thing as much as I love you, daily repopulating word sleuth!" Reger handed her a tissue as notification chimes sounded.

Still, Donoghue said on the Washington Square Park bench, their first meeting wasn't exactly smooth. She admitted that she wasn't able to come up with the game's daily answer the first time she played. "I thought, Oh, God, this will never work. He thinks I'm a total idiot," she recalled. But there Wordle was the next morning, with a "BAGEL." "I started crying and took a screenshot and sent it to my mom and my best friends," she said. "They all agreed he might be a keeper. And then I went out and bought an actual bagel."

Donoghue exhaled into the cold air of the park. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. Wordle, who did not attend college, stared up at his new wife from his five-by-six-square grid.

"I mean, if you think about it, is he even communicating at all?" she mused. "Or is he just a reflection of my subconscious, or thousands of readers' subconsciousnesses?" These were not issues she'd faced in past relationships, she acknowledged. "Sometimes I feel like I'm talking to myself, like everything on the screen is actually generated by me," she said. "Like this isn't a relationship of equals." Nestled in her hand, Wordle remained blank. "And the sex is pretty weird," she added. Donoghue had already solved her spouse's puzzle for that day (appropriately, "THINK"), but she picked up her phone, opened a private browser, and started a new game. "Every relationship involves compromises," she said. "And this is one of ours." She bent over her phone, typing. The Vows photographer nearby lowered his camera. Donoghue showed a reply from her new husband. (Or from herself? Or me, the Vows reporter? Or anyone with a device and Internet access?) "TRULY," Wordle said. The photographer raised his camera and snapped. ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

YOU TELL ME

Why Percival Everett can't say what his novels mean.

BY MAYA BINYAM

Everett's work satirizes identity, America, and the ambitions of language itself.

In a narrow, windowless room at the University of Southern California, a group of graduate students is workshopping a short story. Its author is silent as her classmates deliver gentle feedback. Some suggest minor improvements of pacing, setting, and tone. One student would appreciate a more robust description of the protagonist's emotions, but enjoys the sparseness, too. "I like this version," another adds. "I don't think I have much in the way of critique."

While they speak, their professor, the novelist Percival Everett, sits quietly at the head of a too-large table, one palm steadied against it, his body swivelling almost imperceptibly from side to side. His head, decorated with errant coils of dark gray hair, is framed by a gargantuan television that hangs behind him, its screen a black expanse. He wears the uniform of a professional Everyman: slacks, button-down, glasses. He talks at a low volume, but the sounds he makes have the electric quality of speech being filtered through a mike.

"I think you guys must be a whole lot smarter than me," he says, pushing his glasses to his forehead. "Because I'm just a dumb old cowboy, and I can't figure out what's going on."

Everett, who is sixty-seven, deploys negative hyperbole with abandon, especially when describing the capacities of his own mind. He has published two dozen novels, four collections of short stories, six collections of poetry, and one book for children, all of which he summarily casts off as "shit." "I'm pretty sure everything I'm writing is shit," he told me the first time we met. "I'm just trying to make the best shit I can." After a few meetings, he seemed worried that his shit would become mine, too. "You don't have to read all this shit," he said. And: "Do you always get the shit assignments?"

Everett is American literature's philosopher king—and its sharpest satirist. The significant insignificance of language has long been a preoccupation of his fiction, which plumbs the failures of storytelling to capture (or enhance) the experience of life. In "Dr. No," a gonzo spy thriller from 2022, a scholar who specializes in "nothing" learns his most important lesson from his one-legged dog: "What Trigo had taught me was that pure meaning did not exist, never did and never would." Other protagonists, among them a Derrida-obsessed baby, a philandering painter, and a down-and-out gambler, take for granted that meaning-making is a dance of false promises and willful delusions. Everett himself compares it to a con: "Because we want language to mean something, it means everything."

In class, discussion turns into a debate about whether artificial intelligence can improve a writer's craft.

"It has no ideas!" Everett exclaims.

"Well, if you go into ChatGPT and you're, like, 'Write me a story about a guy who goes to a writing institute to write a novel,' it'll make you a story," a student replies. "So it has some ideas."

Everett's brow relaxes, his voice suddenly chipper. "Did I ever tell you about John Searle's Chinese-room thought experiment?" he asks. The students are quiet. "Imagine that I'm in a room," he says. "I have two windows. Through one window, I receive a character. I have a vast array of characters in front of me. Through trial and error, I learn that when I receive this character, I put out that one, until I learn that when I get this message, I put out that message. I can become perfect at that. But what have I not learned?"

PHOTOGRAPH BY TRACY NGUYEN

The students remain silent. When Everett talks again, it's with a mischievous, satisfied smile.

"How to speak Chinese," he says.

Everett's fiction frequently mystifies critics, who excuse their mystification by describing his work as confounding. His novels often make fun of genres, or else invent them. He has written Westerns, thrillers, a novella in the style of a Lifetime movie, and a handbook for the management of slaves. One novel might even appear in another as an object of ridicule. "Erasure," Everett's 2001 satire of the publishing industry, shows up in "I Am Not Sidney Poitier," published eight years later, when a character named Ted Turner, a founder of CNN, recognizes its author. "I didn't like it," Turner tells the author character, named Percival Everett. "Nor I," Everett says. "I didn't like writing it, and I didn't like it when I was done with it."

There is no single style or subject that unites Everett's novels, but many of them feature one of two psychological settings. There are the cerebral books, the ones in which his passion for philosophy acts as a narrative engine as powerful as plot. And then there are the realist books, many of them set in the American West. The latter are no less uncanny than the former; they seem only to be drawing on a more embodied experience of life. They fixate on the cruelty of humanity, yet manage to light on its potential for love.

My first meeting with Everett was at a restaurant in South Pasadena, where he lives with his wife, the novelist Danzy Senna, and their two teenage sons. I arrived with a long list of questions about his newest novel, "James," a retelling of Mark Twain's "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn." The book—which is narrated by Jim, a young father enslaved by one of Huck's guardians—seemed to fuse Everett's interests: Jim travels the Mississippi but has an imaginary argument with Voltaire. Unlike Twain's Jim, who can't read or write, Everett's Jim displays an unwavering control of language, which he deploys as a means of both disguise and self-expression. Under the cover of night, he offers enslaved children lessons in translation—"Would you like for me to get some sand?" becomes "Oh, Lawd, missums ma'am, you wan fo me to gets some sand?"—so that the enslavers can feel secure in their station. But, once on the run, Jim begins to pen a narrative of his own. "My interest is in how these marks that I am scratching on this page can mean anything at all," he writes. "If they can have meaning, then life can have meaning, then I can have meaning."

Everett answered my first few questions politely, if briefly, but I quickly began to feel like a lawyer at an unsuccessful deposition. He told me that he didn't remember when he began writing "James," or when he finished it, only that he wrote it while watching episodes of Bruce Geller's "Mission: Impossible." He knew that he first read "Huck Finn" as a child, and that the version he read was abridged, but he didn't remember if he liked it, disliked it, or had any reaction to it at all. Before writing "James," he reread "Huck Finn" fifteen times. Now, he said, it was a "blur."

Books, either written or read, are conventionally understood to be pathways to knowledge. But Everett claims to suffer from "work amnesia"; after publishing a book, he forgets its contents entirely.

"I hate the idea that I might know something," he told me during lunch.

"But other people celebrate you for knowing things," I countered, trying to justify our convergence over poached eggs and coffee.

"I know nothing," he said. "Why are you asking me questions?"

I knew that Everett knew something, but I wasn't sure if his insistence otherwise was a mark of false humility or the admission of an aspiration. He has often articulated his desire to write an "abstract novel," a book that is about nothing but language in the same way that an abstract painting is about nothing but paint. But language, unlike paint, never exists on its own. Words on a page will always conjure people, objects, and feelings from life, and so a reader will always expect them to act as representations.

Everett's project is bound to fail; he uses that failure as material. He doesn't try to make words work beyond their capacities—he simply exploits those capacities, so that his readers are forced to question their expectations. He has cited Ralph, the mute baby-genius narrator of "Glyph" (1999), as having a voice "closest" to his own. Ralph spends his days reading semiotic theory, and sometimes writing notes in crayon, knowing they'll be studied for glimmers of revelation. Before being kidnapped by his pediatrician, and then by the Pentagon, he issues a warning. "Attempts at filling in my articulatory gaps with a kind of subtext, though it might prove an amusing exercise, will uncover nothing," he says. "At the risk of sounding cocky, my gaps are not gaps at all, but are already full, and all my meaning is surface."

When asked if an interpretation was his intention, Everett almost always says yes. He knows that his books depend on an audience to achieve significance, and he seems to encourage that dependence. In 2020, he published three versions of his novel "Telephone," a move that he knew would emphasize the authority of his readers—and piss them off. (The novel was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.) "He plays with the reader," his longtime editor, Fiona McCrae, told me. "Part of his subject is our reaction to his work."

Because Everett refuses to analyze his fiction, he is popularly regarded as a "difficult" author, a distinction he wears with pride. "I am a famously difficult interview," he told me more than once. He acknowledges that he can be spacey when his interest isn't held, and he often splices amusing non sequiturs into conversation. ("If you were going to be an animal, which animal would you be?" "Do you think there's a Sasquatch?") He believes that awards are "offensive," and describes them as "invidious comparisons of works of art." His books have won many. "I've never met somebody who gives less of a shit," the director Cord Jefferson, who recently adapted "Erasure" into an Oscar-nominated film, "American Fiction," told me.

Everett's U.S.C. class typically meets at a restaurant near his home. When I visited, it had convened on campus

because Everett was scheduled to attend what he described as "some event." It was a celebration of his recent induction into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. "My god, this thing is killing me," he texted me from the luncheon.

On a clear morning in early November, I waited for Everett in his office. Through the window, downtown Los Angeles looked like a collage: the skyscrapers seemed to have been cut away from the city and pressed against the country. On Everett's desk were a picture of a stick figure labelled "DADDY," drawn by one of his sons; a puppet of Hugo Chávez, the Venezuelan dictator, given to him by a friend; and a wooden horse figurine, sent to him by a Chinese translator.

Everett walked through the door bearing a letter. "I can't make sense of it," he complained, handling the envelope as if it were cursed. But when he settled into his chair and read the letter aloud it seemed entirely straightforward. An editor was asking him to contribute a piece of short criticism to a new publication. In terms of subject matter, the editor believed he would have much to choose from—there was, as the letter put it, "a boatload of African American fiction coming out this season."

"Well, that's a bad metaphor," I said.

Everett didn't miss a beat. "Right now, it's somewhere in the Middle Passage," he said.

For Everett, "African American fiction" is a commodity posing as a genre. In 1991, when he was perhaps more amenable to performing the duties of his profession, he published an essay on the state of American authorship. "We are at the economic mercy of a market which seeks to affirm its beliefs about African-Americans," he wrote. In the years since, his work has been celebrated for refusing to provide that affirmation, for enabling Black characters to escape the archetypes—the slave, the Glock star, the welfare queen—to which they've been confined. And yet Everett knows that the only way out is in. The essay continued, "Even when our work seeks to be something else, it is a reaction to the position in which we and our works have been placed."

Everett writes quickly, the reception of one book often seeming to forge the conceit of the next. According to him, when Norman Lear, who died last year, attempted to adapt his début novel, "Suder," into a feature film, Lear suggested that its Black protagonist be played by a white actor. Everett went on to write two novels in which the protagonist's race is unspecified. (The film was never made.) He read a review of the first—a novel about a Vietnam veteran who befriends a one-legged sheep farmer—that criticized him for failing to adequately represent "black life." A decade later, he wrote a novel about a mid-career novelist who pens a parody that turns "black life" into a bite-size monolith, available for popular consumption.

It was 1996. Everett was visiting the poet Cornelius Eady, who had just received a copy of "Push," by Sapphire. Everett read the book overnight. "I was left back when I was twelve because I had a baby for my fahver," the narrator, an illiterate teen-ager who is pregnant for the second time with her father's child (the first one has "Down Sinder"), announces. The book, praised widely for its "gritty realism," didn't enrage Everett until he learned that its paperback rights had just sold for an exorbitant amount of money. In the back of Eady's car, Everett thought up the first line of the novel-within-a-novel that cleaves "Erasure": "Mama look at me and Tardreece and she call us 'human slough.'"

"Erasure"'s protagonist is a middle-aged writer named Thelonious (Monk) Ellison. Monk lives in Los Angeles, where he teaches literature and writes novels that are recognized for their accomplishment, but never for their revelations. (One is a cerebral reworking of a Greek tragedy, similar to Everett's "Frenzy.") As a collection, they fail to satisfy the market; editors, passing on Monk's latest manuscript, complain that it is not "black enough," even as bookstores shelve his back catalogue under "African American Studies." "I was a victim of racism by virtue of my failing to acknowledge racial difference and by failing to have my art be defined as an exercise

"It's carpentry for now while I'm living at my parents', but I'm working on some really big stuff in the messiah-slash-prophet space. You should totally come to my launch!"

in racial self-expression," he reflects.

Monk believes that his obscurity safeguards his artistic integrity. But when he encounters the latest literary sensation, "We's Lives in Da Ghetto," a début novel written by an Oberlin graduate who once spent two days in Harlem, he has a fit of inspiration and writes a minstrel tale of his own. The novel, published under a pen name and narrated by an adolescent rapist on the run from his baby mamas and, later, the L.A.P.D., is called "My Pafology." After it sells for six hundred thousand dollars, Monk gives it a new title: "Fuck." Monk hates the book, believing it racist. But his mother's Alzheimer's is rapidly progressing, his brother is in the wake of an expensive divorce, and his sister, an abortion provider, has just been killed by pro-life fanatics. He takes the check.

Since its publication, "Erasure" has been conventionally read as an argument for the celebration of intraracial diversity. Monk's mother's disease, his sister's death, his romance with a woman who owns a beach house near his—"these issues have little or nothing to do with race," a recent reflection on the novel, published in the *Times*, declared. "And their existence proves the point that Monk has been trying to make all along—that his 'Black experience' is just as representative as anyone's." But "Erasure" doesn't tell the story of an author who successfully defies (and therefore expands) expectations for the kinds of narrative that get called "representative"; it tells the story of an author who, believing the representational claims of literature to be a farce, creates his own farcical doppelgänger, a racial double that guarantees his legibility just as swiftly as it insures his annihilation.

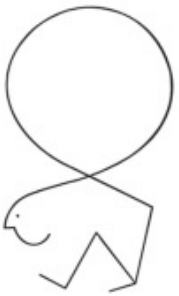
Although Everett is quick to disavow his ego, he is just as quick to create its simulacra: his protagonists share his preoccupations and revisit his memories. One day, over coffee, Everett began talking about his mother.

"I drove a Jeep, the oldest Jeep Cherokee you could imagine," he said. "It would kill her to call it a truck. I'd call it a truck, and she'd say, 'You mean your station wagon.'"

"This is in 'Erasure,'" I responded.

"I don't think so," Everett said. "But I don't remember. You're scaring me."

Indeed, Monk tells the same story in the novel's first paragraph, after he identifies himself reluctantly as a writer and, more proudly, as a "son, a brother, a fisherman, an art lover, a woodworker." Everett himself is an accomplished abstract painter; he has also worked as a jazz guitarist, a horse trainer, a tracker, and a cowboy. "If there is an actual Dos Equis man," the novelist Chris Abani told me, "Percival is him."



Distortion animates all writing, but it is sanctioned only in fiction. "I hate this nonfiction shit that's out in the world," Everett once told an interviewer. ("If you're writing memoirs," he continued, your mother "ought to beat you with a two-by-four.") During our conversations, he sometimes seemed as though he was laboring to forget my task, or else to divert it. "Are you sure you aren't my kid?" he asked during our second meeting, over breakfast at Hollywood's Soho House. We finished eating, and Everett squinted in my direction. "Do you play tennis?" he asked. "I'm looking for a tennis partner." We began to say goodbye. "You don't have to write the profile," he said as we walked toward our cars. "We could just be friends."

And yet there were just as many moments when Everett seemed open to the duplicity involved in biographical journalism—titillated, even, by the idea of participating in it. One morning, driving to the San Gabriel Mountains, we passed Santa Anita Park, a Thoroughbred racetrack. "We should create an entire persona for me where I go gamble," Everett said, beginning to mimic the frenzied anticipation of a racegoer. He beat the steering wheel, adjusted his pitch: "Come on, Cinderella's Dream, come on!"

Everett grew up in Columbia, South Carolina, in a sprawling, forty-five-hundred-square-foot home built by his grandfather. His grandfather, the son of a former slave, was a doctor. His father was a doctor. His sister would become a doctor, too. Everett finds the largeness of his childhood home "embarrassing," the preponderance of doctors "weird." He describes his youth as "uneventful." He attended segregated schools until he was in junior high, but, when I asked about his experience of integration, he just said that he "apparently played the flute." At home, he spent hours reading Kurt Vonnegut and looking at maps. He took for granted that he would leave South Carolina, but did not feel for it any special dislike.

When Everett spoke to me about his home state, his tone was disaffected. But when I encountered that state in an old bit of memoir, the genre he claims to disdain, it was cast in the white-hot language of dissidence. In a two-page-long sketch titled "Why I'm from Texas," from 2001, Everett describes South Carolina's population as "neanderthal, pathetically under-educated, confederate-clad, so-called descendants of pathetically under-educated cannon fodder of the middle 19th century." In "I Am Not Sidney Poitier," the protagonist is arrested and put on a prison bus, which carries him through Georgia, where Everett was born. "There was absolutely nothing and no one there of any value," he observes, glancing out the window. "It was a terrestrial black hole, rather white hole, a kind of giant Caucasian anus that only sucked, yet smelled like a fart."

For Everett, geography is a tool of intervention and manipulation. "You always add an element to a story once you locate it someplace," he has said. "It might shape the characters. It might also shape the expectations of the readers, and that's as much fun to play with as the characters." In "The Appropriation of Cultures," a short story from 1996, Daniel, a Black graduate of Brown University, where Everett received his master's in fiction, returns to his home town of Columbia, South Carolina, to occupy the house left to him by his late mother. He spends his days reading and his nights playing jazz guitar at a club. One evening, a group of drunk white fraternity brothers heckles him from the audience; they'd like him to

play "Dixie," the Confederacy's unofficial anthem. They intend the request as a cruel joke, but when Daniel begins to play, squeezing out the melody he grew up hating, he finds that he means what he sings: *In Dixie Land, I'll take my stand to live and die in Dixie*. His performance comes straight from the heart. The fraternity brothers storm out, and Daniel realizes that "he liked the song, wanted to play it again, knew that he would."

Over lunch, Everett called "Dixie"—which was written, in 1859, by Daniel Decatur Emmett, the founder of an infamous blackface minstrel troupe—a "Black anthem." (The troupe makes an appearance in "James," when Emmett, admiring Jim's tenor, buys him off a blacksmith.) After Daniel's performance, he acquires a beat-up pickup truck with a Confederate-flag decal on the rear window. "I've decided that the rebel flag is my flag," he tells a friend. "My blood is southern blood, right?" He sings "Dixie" at a banquet of Black doctors, and soon Black people across South Carolina sport the Confederate flag on their lapels and cars. Having become a symbol of Black power, the flag suddenly disappears from the state capitol: "There was no ceremony, no notice. One day, it was not there."

When Everett was sixteen, he enrolled at the University of Miami, where he studied philosophy. To pay for his classes, he played jazz guitar in clubs and wrote other students' term papers. One summer, he drove his lime-green Fiat west. From Florida, he took Interstate 10 through Alabama, Louisiana, Texas, and New Mexico. When he reached the canyon lands in Arizona, he was angry. He hated that he had already encountered the landscape in photographs, that his ability to see what was in front of him had been tarnished by replicas. And yet even that corroded image spun in him a new belief, as old as America: the West was his.

Everett has described this journey as a cosmic inevitability. "All things move from east to west," he once said. "The sun does, and so should we." He has spent much of his adult life in New Mexico, California, Wyoming, and Oregon, where he began a Ph.D. program in language philosophy and—before dropping out—started working on a ranch. While bottle-feeding a lamb, Everett watched sheep wander the green hills of the pasture, and thought of the crowds in Miami. He started to cry.

Many of Everett's characters believe that the West is a place, not a parable. For John Hunt, the horse trainer who narrates "Wounded" (2005), the desert is a desert. "It was dramatic land, dry, remote, wild," he reflects. "It was why I loved the West. I had no affection necessarily for the history of the people and certainly none for the mythic West, the West that never existed." But these men also insist that the West serve as an escape: a quintessential American destination without the social trappings of America. In "Watershed" (1996), a hydrologist named Robert Hawks flees his girlfriend for the plains of Colorado, a landscape that insures his "complete removal":

> I considered how I had done so much to remove all things political from my life. . . . I didn't talk about politics, didn't respond to talk about politics, didn't care about what I read in the papers, and didn't feel any guilt about my lack of participation in those issues of social importance. I did not know or associate with many black people. As it was, I didn't associate with many people at all, trying at most turns to avoid humans. . . . I didn't believe in god, I didn't believe in race, and I especially didn't believe in America. I simply didn't care, wouldn't care, refused to care.

Everett describes people as "worse than anybody," and his frontiersmen share his misanthropy: they believe that transcendence occurs in the wild, where no one is watching. But, slowly, the landscapes that enable their seclusion begin to bear the marks of the politics they've disavowed. In "Wounded," Hunt finds two coyote pups in the remains of a fire, nurses one back to health, and eventually seeks revenge on the culprits, a band of hillbillies whom he suspects of kidnapping his gay ranch hand. In "Watershed," a creek that flows onto a reservation is poisoned with anthrax. A group of Native insurgents requires Hawks's expertise, and, by the novel's end, he's become a crucial agent in a movement against the F.B.I.: water, he discovers, may be a natural element, but it's also an inalienable right. In the story that these men tell about the West, their extreme capability is proof that they are meant to live alone. But, in the real West, that capability is a calling: it forces them to play the hero.

In 1992, Everett bought a ranch in the Banning Pass, between Los Angeles and Palm Springs, where he grew more than a hundred varieties of roses and tended to horses, donkeys, and mules. Neighbors were always bringing injured animals to his doorstep. One day, he found a baby crow that had fallen out of a tree. Everett cared for the crow until it was strong enough to fly, but the crow would simply fly in a loop, land beside him, and start to walk. When Everett tried to drive to town, the crow followed his truck, flying in tandem with his moving face. Everett built a perch out of PVC and stuck it in the cab so that they could travel around together. "I kept trying to get him to go out and have crow sex," Everett told me. "I said, 'Listen, you're not going to get much satisfaction here.'"

At the time, Everett was working on "Erasure," and the crow would shuffle down his arm and peck at the keys. But then he went on vacation, and the bird disappeared. Everett eventually assumed he was dead. He'd named him Jim. Jim Crow.

Everett's influences are various—Wittgenstein, Chester Himes, Bertrand Russell, J. L. Austin, Robert Coover—and he keeps them front of mind. But, when I asked if he was interested in their personal lives, he seemed to find the idea inconceivable. So I was surprised when he suggested that we go see "Maestro," Bradley Cooper's film about the composer Leonard Bernstein—another one of Everett's heroes—and his vexed relationship with his wife.

We went to the Egyptian, a gaudy theatre in the style of a pyramid, complete with hieroglyphs. Onstage, an attendant introduced the film as a "great love story," but by the end it seemed a great tragedy. Cooper's Bernstein, absorbed in his work and in multiple affairs, had lost his wife; their love found its strongest expression during his performances, when an orchestra was between them.

As we drove home, Everett seemed more pleased by the film's artifice than by its insight. The early scenes, rendered in black-and-white, were bold, bombastic, spectacular—conversations turned into dance sequences at the drop of a hat. "I liked that the movie accepted that it was a movie," he said. "I liked that it wasn't pretending to be real life."

Like Bernstein, Kevin Pace, the protagonist of "So Much Blue" (2017), is an artist with a wife and children. At the novel's start, he's working on a large abstract painting that he allows no one to see, and which his best friend has agreed to burn if he dies. The painting is a secret, but it's inspired by secrets, too—by an affair with a French woman nearly twenty-five years Kevin's junior, and by a pair of encounters on the eve of El Salvador's civil war. ("A picture is a secret about a secret," reads the novel's epigraph, from Diane Arbus.) Kevin's feelings, like Bernstein's, are hidden from his family and expressed obliquely in his art. But what begins as an ideal quickly morphs into an indulgence. "There is a cruelty in abstraction," Kevin reflects near the novel's conclusion. "My paintings were abstract and splashed with guilt as much as paint, scratched with shame as much as with the knife or spatula." Kevin never tells his wife his secrets, but he does, in the end, show her his painting. Ignorant of its meaning, she can read only its distortions. "So much blue," she observes. "Now you know everything," Kevin says.

The more I read Everett's work, the more my thoughts turned to jazz. "It is the player who, by improvising, makes jazz," Bernstein said. "He uses the popular song as a kind of dummy to hang his notes on. He dresses it up in his own way and it comes out an original." A jazz player may reference sheet music, but the resulting performance—animated by intuition and impulse—exceeds the descriptive capacities of the language it draws from. An elliptical expression of Black life, jazz refuses to be decoded as such. James Baldwin compared it to the talking drum, used to convey messages across distances that the human voice can't travel: "It is a music which creates, as what we call History cannot

SKETCHBOOK BY SOFIA WARREN

sum up the courage to do, the response to that absolutely universal question: *Who am I? What am I doing here?*"

"The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" is the story of one boy's escapade down the river that divides the country into East and West. Huck, having faked his own death, is fleeing his alcoholic father. Jim, a father himself, is fleeing Huck's guardian, who plans to sell him downriver. The two become an unlikely pair, their plights strangely symmetrical. But Huck, in Twain's treatment, is the hero: Jim's liberation is his ultimate adventure. In the book's final chapters, Huck and his friend Tom Sawyer hatch a plan to set Jim free, a process that they protract by requiring Jim, who's trapped in a cabin, to pen a "mournful inscription." They instruct him to carve it on a rock, but the rock, just outside the cabin, is too heavy for them to carry alone. They let Jim out, and he carries it with Huck. Then they lock him back up, his freedom a procedural figment of their fantasy.

Everett is not the first to reimagine Huck and Jim's coupling, which other artists have interpreted as romantic or paternal. But he is perhaps the first to try to invert it. In "James," Huck is Jim's shameful appendage, the object of Jim's resentful affection. He is the secret Jim can't give up, the wedge that cleaves Jim's family. At times, they get split up, and the book follows Jim, who's both unsettled and emboldened: "I was also sick with worry over Huck and ashamed to feel such relief for being rid of him." And yet he returns to Huck again and again, their reunions exalted and sickly sweet. "You need me," Huck tells Jim, who hates "that what he said was true." Their association has the cold determinism of biology, or addiction—it forces Jim into a cruel decision, a decision that seems to contain the promise of a final release but which, once made, pulls him further into the current of their impossible love.

"I'm not correcting anything," Everett once said. "That would mean I know enough to correct." And yet it's difficult not to read "James" as a corrective of Everett's previous works, if not of its source material. For Jim's predecessors, freedom requires abstraction: the problem is other people. But Jim's understanding of freedom is literal. He knows that his happiness depends upon the emancipation of his family. At first, he wields a pencil, but then he exchanges it for a gun.

Everett is transfixed by rivers, and finds some so stunning that he can't look at them directly. One day, I proposed that he teach me how to fish. Everett wasn't sure there were fish to be had. It was the end of fall, and Los Angeles hadn't seen significant rain for months. As we drove into the mountains, things looked bleak. The reservoir was low, the yucca plants were going to seed, and discarded Starbucks cups blew across the road like tumbleweed.

At the riverbed, we set our gear down near the ashes of a fire. Everett showed me his fishing flies, displaying them like a jeweller fingering his gems. There were zug bugs, damselflies, jassid beetles, woolly buggers. Everett enjoys catching fish but is equally enlivened by the process of mimicking their prey. He compares it to writing: once you've attracted a reader with what they think they want, you can get them hooked on what you have.

I thought we would fish for hours. But after fifteen minutes Everett suggested that we smoke cigars. We found a rock that looked like a chair and took turns sitting on it. In the distance, the mountains were an unlikely gray. Senna, Everett's wife, had told me that they'd toyed with a move East. I asked if he would miss the landscape.

"I'm a real Westerner," he said, gazing at the mountains. "But they would still be here."

Everett handled his cigar like a cigar. The river was a river. Presumably, it contained fish, even if they refused to make themselves evident.

The following week, Everett returned to the river alone. I'd sensed that he had seen in it something I couldn't. Over lunch, he relayed what he found. A few miles north of where we had tried to fish, there was an undercut bank; from its ledge, he had been able to see trout slicing through the water.

Because I had failed to observe Everett catch a fish, I suggested we do an activity that might let me observe him read. After we finished our meal, I shuffled a deck of tarot cards and asked him to pose a question.

"How can I help my family be happy?" Everett asked.

I split the deck into three piles. Everett chose a pile, and then I drew three cards from the top of it: the Six of Pentacles, the Magician, and the Five of Cups. In the Five of Cups, a robed man stands alone by a river. Three toppled cups sit before him; two, still upright, are at his back. I asked Everett to tell me what he saw.

"You said the cups are emotions," he said. "Well, the posture is one of dejection. But there's a light around him, so it's maybe not dejection as much as introspection. He's looking at a river, so the river is time. There's red and green coming out of those cups. . . . The red would most obviously have to be blood. . . . He's standing in front of those two cups, protecting them."

"Do you think he's looking at himself?" I asked.

"I think he's looking at the river," Everett said seriously. "I—I have depression. I suffer from depression."

"And this feels like a depressive card?" I asked.

"That's my first thought," Everett said. "What's going on in your head while you look at these? That's what I'm interested in."

I told Everett what I saw in the cards. While we spoke, I checked to see whether the narrative was resonating. "We've made it resonate," he said. And he was right. A few hours after we parted, I sent him a photo of the cards laid out against the red stain of a wooden table. The next day, he sent me a detail from one of his paintings in progress, a rust-colored expanse with three rectangular figures travelling across it. I wasn't sure if the painting was inspired by the cards, or if, in my image of the cards, he had seen his painting. ♦

From NBC New York.

"The gun parts were artfully concealed in two smooth creamy jars of peanut butter, but there was certainly nothing smooth about the way the man went about trying to smuggle his gun," said John Essig, TSA's Federal Security Director for JFK Airport.

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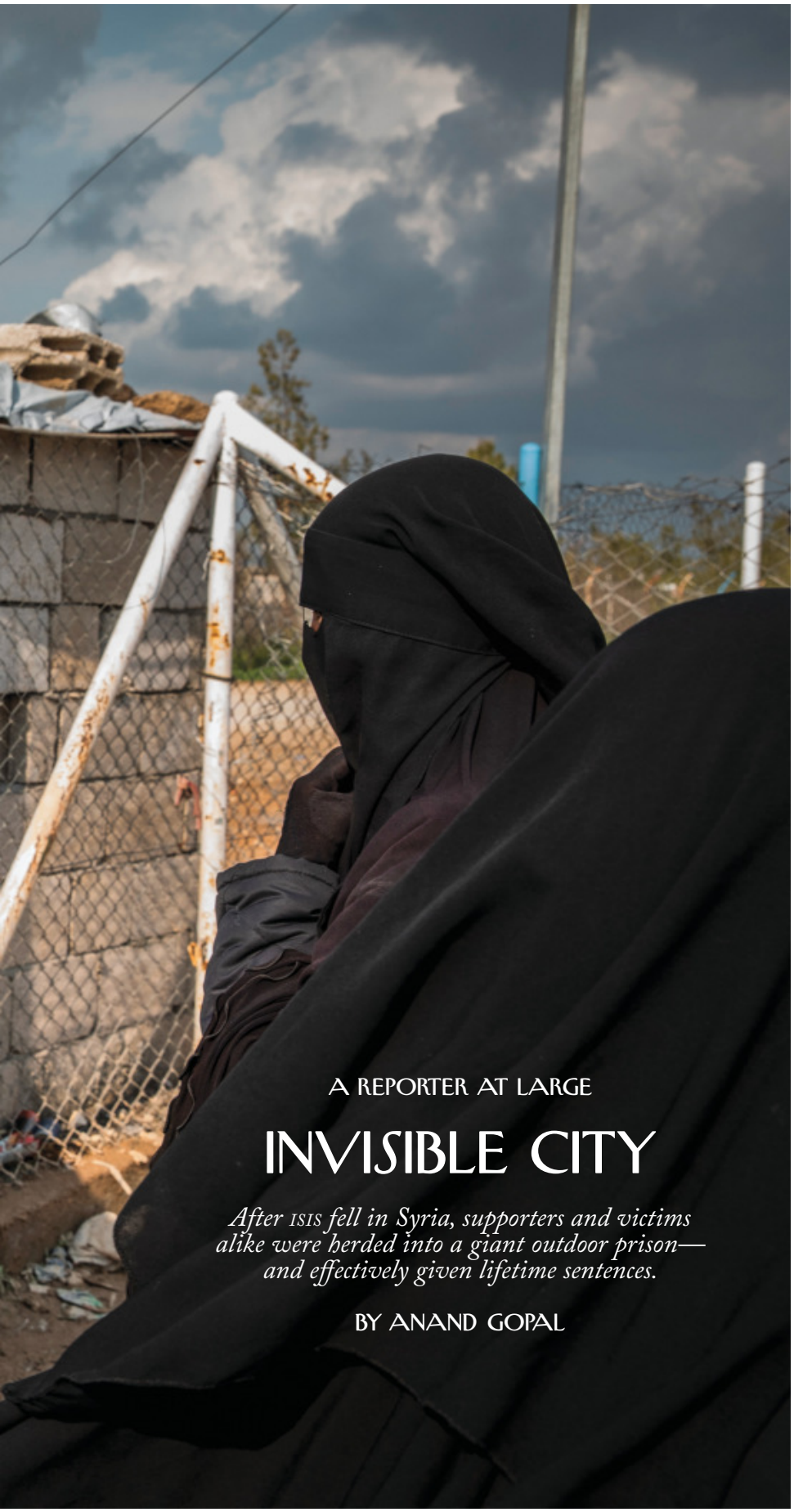
All the camp's residents are under indefinite detention, even though no plans have been made to prosecute any of them. More



A REPORTER AT LARGE

INVISIBLE CITY

After ISIS fell in Syria, supporters and victims alike were herded into a giant outdoor prison—and effectively given lifetime sentences.

BY ANAND GOPAL

than half the camp's population are children. Dozens of babies are born each month.

The dead turned up everywhere. Two decapitated corpses in a cesspit. The remains of a woman with a pierced skull. A child with a bullet hole in his temple. Men clustering around a ditch suggested the worst, as did women running at full speed through the dirt. With each grim discovery, Jihan Omar renewed a promise to herself: she had to find a way out.

Jihan lived in Al-Hol, a detention camp in eastern Syria which could more properly be called a concentration camp. Al-Hol was created decades ago, in a stretch of scrubland about ten miles west of the Iraqi border, as a haven for refugees. But in 2019, when the U.S.-led coalition vanquished ISIS—the armed group that had briefly established a breakaway caliphate within Syria and Iraq, imposing an extremist interpretation of Islamic law—tens of thousands of people who'd been living under its rule were herded to the camp. Guard towers and armored vehicles and concertina-crowned walls appeared, and residents could no longer walk out the gate.

About fifty thousand people are currently imprisoned in Al-Hol, which is named for a dilapidated nearby town. The detainees hail from more than fifty countries: Chinese and Trinidadians and Russians and Swedes and Brits live alongside Syrians and Iraqis. Many of the adults had either joined ISIS or been married to someone who'd joined. But many others have no links to the Islamic State and fled to the camp to escape the punishing U.S.-led bombing campaign. Some were thrown into ISIS's orbit by force: Yazidis enslaved by commanders, teenage girls married off by their families. More than half the population are children, the majority of whom are younger than twelve. Dozens of babies are born each month. All the residents are under indefinite detention, as no plans have apparently been made to prosecute any of them—imagine if Guantánamo were the size of a city, and its inmates were mostly women and children. The United Nations has called Al-Hol a "blight on the conscience of humanity."

The camp, which is in a region of Syria still protected by several hundred U.S. troops, is under the aegis of a beleaguered force of mostly Kurdish fighters—soldiers who had previously aligned with the Americans to defeat ISIS. They

are largely backed by the United States, but the Pentagon declines to specify how much it spends annually on Al-Hol. The Kurdish fighters guard the camp's perimeter in SWAT vehicles, and a primarily Kurdish civilian administration manages the camp bureaucracy, coördinating with aid organizations to distribute rations and deliver such basic services as sewage treatment and water. But the camp itself—block after block of dirt lanes and tents—is effectively under the control of its ISIS inmates. All-female squads of religious police pressure women to cover head to toe in the black niqab; violators have been dragged to makeshift Sharia courts, where judges order floggings and executions. Assassination cells gun down inmates accused of passing information to camp authorities.

For years, I have been visiting Al-Hol with a health-related humanitarian organization. To stand in one of the camp's alleys is to feel a type of vertigo: in every direction, rows of tents—U.N.-issued blue nylon and polyester patched together with white and beige scraps of fabric—stretch to the horizon. Above this canvas metropolis loom red water towers whose tanks are known to teem with worms. Some days, simoom winds blast open tent flaps, covering residents with dust. The smell of sand and raw sewage is overwhelming.

Jihan, who arrived in the camp in 2018, spent years plotting escape. Some guards were corrupt, and she occasionally heard of prisoners bribing their way out. This carried great risk, though, and required huge sums of cash. The safest approach was to wait for the camp's security officials to decide, through a secretive process that no prisoner quite understood, that you didn't pose a threat, or to confirm that you'd never belonged to ISIS in the first place. Such beneficence could take years, though, or might never come. Identifying an intermediary who had the ear of the jailers was crucial, and after much searching Jihan believed that she'd found just the person: a fifty-four-year-old inmate named Hamid al-Shummari, who promised that he would raise her case with the authorities.

"There isn't a problem on this earth I cannot solve," Hamid told me.

One afternoon in January, 2021, I visited Hamid's tent, which he'd outfitted with floor cushions and hanging bulbs, in an homage to the bungalow that he'd had on the outside. Hamid, who possessed the regal bearing of a man accustomed to addressing tribal gatherings, had a well-grooved Bedouin face and wore a checkered *shemagh* scarf swirled around his gray hair. He and his family had arrived in Al-Hol after fleeing the war—an outcome that might have reduced someone less resourceful to despair. But Hamid threw himself into camp life, befriending neighbors and smoothing over daily calamities. He roved from tent to tent, insuring that detainees received their allotments of the camp's two official provisions: bread and cooking gas, both of which are supplied by non-governmental organizations. Before long, he was serving as an advocate for the camp's tens of thousands of Syrians to the authorities. The role filled him with pride—his great fear wasn't penury or dispossession but to be thought of as not useful.

On the afternoon we met, a dozen women, all clad in black, were awaiting his audience. Hamid told me that he'd recently succeeded in obtaining official approval to open a sewing workshop for the women. He wished that he could give me a tour of the facility, but he wasn't keen to be seen with a foreigner. Not everyone was grateful for his efforts; some inmates, who were linked to ISIS, denounced him as a collaborator. And conditions in the camp were deteriorating; the previous evening, five detainees had been murdered. "The people here are forgotten by the world," he told me.

Some days later, Hamid and a few of his sons were walking home from a tent used as a mosque. They had finished Friday prayers. Teen-agers were loitering on a lot that served as a soccer field, though it lacked goalposts. As Hamid paused in front of his tent, to suggest to his family that they erect a wall to protect themselves, a man approached. He was wearing Adidas sneakers and track pants, as if he had just come from the soccer field, and he'd covered his face in a *shemagh*. As Hamid turned to greet him, the man fired a pistol. The bullet tore through Hamid's neck. One of his sons ran at the attacker and was shot in the face.

Jihan Omar, who lived a few tents down, heard the shots and rushed into the street. When she saw that the father and son had been murdered, she collapsed. She'd believed that Hamid was an angel sent by God to deliver her from imprisonment. In the days that followed, she despaired. Jihan had pictured herself walking freely through the boisterous souks and open fields of her youth. Now she was trapped, maybe forever.

Among the hundreds of women I crossed paths with in Al-Hol, Jihan was one of the few who appeared before me without a face covering; it was her way of repudiating the memory of living under ISIS. Her eyes were the color of honey, and her smile said, *I know what I'm doing*. When she came to a decision, no exhortation or inducement could move her. In a different time and place, this quality could have been seen as ordinary stubbornness, but in the camp it signalled unusual resolve.

I first met with Jihan in her tent on a spring day, in the hope of better understanding how so many women and their children had ended up in Al-Hol. A curtain separated the areas that passed for the living room and the kitchen. There was a single mattress on the floor. Nearby, goats bleated.

Like many detainees, Jihan supplemented her rations using money earned from occasional jobs around the camp. She had recently started working as a janitor at a kindergarten, where she made about eight dollars a day. A few aid organizations had established schools in Al-Hol, although ISIS occasionally burned them down, because they dared to teach secular subjects. She was usually home by the early afternoon, but the work didn't cease: she swept the tent clean of sand, patched rips in the nylon, and prepared dinner, often with provisions handed out by charities.

Jihan told me that she was born in the early eighties, in a neighborhood in the Old City of Homs, in western Syria. It was a world of narrow streets, ancient buildings of black basalt with ogive windows, and inner courtyards with lemon and loquat trees. Marwa al-Sabouni, an architect from Homs, has written that "it

PREVIOUS SPREAD: IVOR PRICKETT

was common to hear the bells of Christian churches and the Muslim call to prayer echoing through the streets at the same time." Jihan recalled Friday picnics in which her family would prepare lime-shaped *kibbe* in yogurt sauce. "We used to sit in the yard of our house, next to the jasmine and the fountain, drinking yerba maté, listening to my mother singing in her sweet voice," she said.

Jihan excelled in school, but, at the age of thirteen, after watching her older siblings' university degrees come to nothing, she dropped out to become a seamstress. She apprenticed at a workshop, learning to handle bodices and chiffons; within a few years, she could sew a bridal ensemble. Soon, she was talking about designing her own wedding gown—lots of lace, flared like a bell—and her parents took note. In traditional quarters of Homs, most marriages were arranged, so one day they introduced her to a tall boy with rich brown skin named Ahmed. Jihan knew of him from the neighborhood; he had a reputation for chasing away men who catcalled women. The families gathered in the Omars' living room and encouraged the pair to speak privately in a corner—Jihan's father insisted that the decision be hers. She sat before Ahmed, staring into her lap. He was soft-spoken, with a kindness to his voice. She summoned the courage to look at him. "He had nice eyes, the color of honey," she recalled. "We had the same eyes, so I believed it was fate."

Jihan and Ahmed became engaged; they selected invitation cards and playlists for the wedding, and picked out wallpaper and kitchen appliances for their future home. He wasn't like other neighborhood men, who saw married life as a kingdom ruled by fiat. "He did not impose anything," she recalled. "He told me, 'You are my life partner, we have to share everything.'" Ahmed promised that his family would have no say over their affairs; their secrets would remain their own. As they planned this shared existence, Jihan realized that she was in love.

She remembered every detail of her wedding: the procession through the winding streets, the metallic-sounding voices on the cassette tapes, the friends dancing the *dabke*, the date-filled *maamoul* cookies. The family couldn't afford soft drinks, so they provided water. Afterward, Jihan spent her first night in her new home—a room at her in-laws'. Exhausted, nervous, and flush with optimism, she was sixteen.

Jihan had noticed that the act of matrimony transformed many of her friends' charming suitors into petty tyrants. Some husbands even forbade their wives to work. But Ahmed kept his word about sharing decisions. "Our years passed like a dream," Jihan told me. Her husband worked with great industry, earning a decent wage as a laborer. When he returned home in the evening, they smoked Lucky Strikes and talked of vacations. Like her, he had little interest in Islam; instead, his faith was in the idea of progress, and he assiduously saved money. Once, he surprised her with a washing machine; later, she was astonished to learn that he'd managed to buy a plot of land out in the suburbs, on which he hoped to build a new home.

Jihan prepared to quit tailoring. She hoped for two boys and a girl; her daughter would be named Sarah, after a dear friend. But they had trouble conceiving. Men in the neighborhood often used this difficulty as a pretext to take a second wife, but Ahmed promised Jihan that she was the only one for him. They planned their future home: life became the measurement of curtains, the weighing of shades of blue. In 2011, when the television began showing scenes of protests in Egypt, Ahmed and Jihan hardly paid attention.

Then protests against Syria's dictator, Bashar al-Assad, erupted in their neighborhood. Jihan wasn't sure what to think, but Ahmed believed that demonstrations would bring only chaos. He moved their Friday picnics indoors and stayed home from work. The authorities were responding with force, gunning down unarmed protesters and detaining activists. In response, angry residents launched a sit-in at a clock tower; regime soldiers massacred them, leaving the asphalt streaked with blood. Not long afterward, troops opened fire on Jihan's street while a friend, Aisha, was making coffee at home. A bullet shattered the window, killing Aisha. Jihan stopped going outdoors, and was afraid even to pass by her own windows.

One day, Ahmed came home in a panic: he'd witnessed a regime soldier fatally shoot an elderly neighbor, whose body was thrown from his wheelchair. Jihan and Ahmed soon abandoned their possessions and fled to the countryside with their relatives, taking shelter in an empty house offered by a local family.

Meanwhile, Homs became a kill zone. Protesters took up weapons, forming rebel groups. The regime shelled the city, reducing neighborhoods to rubble. Pro-government militias dismembered children and set bodies ablaze. Jihan noticed a change in Ahmed. Like everyone else who'd fled, he'd lost his job, but he would stay out all day without telling her where he was going. He'd return in a dark mood, relating news of fresh massacres. In a nearby town, regime fighters executed

"Feel free to borrow any book, as long as it's not load-bearing."

LATE SHIFT

Those days I could only love someone who was ashamed
Of their teeth. The way the dogs will always sleep in the spots

They know I'll need to step. The things we do so not to lose
Each other. So as to lose something every day. Church key,

Bar rag, the obscene puckered red of maraschino, the wrecked
Line cook in the walk-in. His chilled kiss. How it tastes like a future

Eviction. Thieves in the temple of our bodies. Years later I will
Still feel most at home when I eat standing up. When I settle up

In cash. When I barter for your attention. Fingernail of heat
Lightning tapping the tabled sky. A broken pint glass

In the ice bin. Every shift Sinéad sings This is the last day
Of our acquaintance. *There are nights I give up on the world*

But not my body. How in the Bruegel, if you didn't know
The title you might not look for Icarus at all, a paper lantern

Giving its wish back to ground long after we've left. Push
A fork into a fish & what you get is a meal. Push a knife into

A knuckle & what you get is to be changed. Like Icarus, what I want
Is to start over but not do it all again. Like Icarus, I wanted the light

To love me back. How in my lungs still nests the fur of every animal I
Ever kept. Years later the gods will have me cough up a snow leopard.

nearly a hundred people, half of them children. Ahmed began lashing out at friends, relatives, and even Jihan. He abandoned the Friday picnics, saying that he felt guilty breathing fresh country air while, just miles away, his friends were being buried. He joined the Free Syrian Army, an assemblage of pro-democracy rebel groups. But a shortage of funds forced some units into brigandage, which deepened Ahmed's cynicism: the government was murderous and the rebels were corrupt. He could no longer even visit his plot of land because the road there was crisscrossed by checkpoints. And what was the use of owning land when the world was collapsing?

Ahmed received daily updates about the carnage in Homs from his best friend, Ali, who'd stayed behind. One day in 2013, Ahmed got a phone call: Ali had been bringing home a breakfast of eggs and yogurt when he was shot in the forehead by a regime sniper. Ahmed smashed his phone to pieces, sobbing, and locked himself in his room. Jihan had never seen him like this; she worried he would harm himself. He left home. Days later, his mother brought him back, but he had a new, distant look. "I'm sick and tired of this life," he told Jihan. "I'm going to join the Islamic State."

When night falls in Al-Hol, the floodlights cast a fluorescent glow on the tents, and the camp feels like some extraterrestrial colony, severed from civilization. Jihan didn't have a phone—guards confiscate them during raids—and her tent lacked electricity. At night, she would lie on her mattress, the desert wind whipping the nylon. Occasionally, she permitted herself to think about Ahmed. Something had been churning within him, she told me, but his decision to join ISIS remained inscrutable to her. Back in 2013, there had been nearly a thousand rebel groups, an alphabet soup of acronyms. She had no clue that one of them—the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria—was different. Nonetheless, she was convinced that Ahmed's enlistment would bring ruin on them. She begged him to reconsider. For the first time, they had vicious fights: slammed doors, shattered dishware. But nothing could move Ahmed; there was a fury in him that frightened her. Sometimes he didn't come home, and Jihan spent the night crying into her pillow.

Ahmed's decision alarmed both their families. His relatives knew nothing about ISIS but believed that the only way to survive was to keep the armed factions at a distance. Jihan's father—who had never raised his voice at her—screamed that she must divorce Ahmed.

"How can I leave my husband?" she asked.

"If you don't, I will never forgive you," he said.

For a month, Jihan stayed indoors,

I thought the main selling point of breathing was we didn't have to
Be reminded to do it. I never wanted children but I always liked the one

About Athena pouring full-grown from Zeus' forehead. How did we survive
Before Advil, love. Before the armor of us glinting in the closed kitchen

Dark. The way a creaky floorboard's one job is to wait. Service means
The spoon appears before you know you need it. The water looks

To refill itself. The napkin calls a truce. When something is soft we believe
We deserve to touch it & so we do. When something is sharp we long to

Perfect it. Nothing belongs to us until last call: one more &
Then no more. The lights go on & it's time to cough up

What's owed. Build a cathedral in the dead of night & then give it
A shift meal, a smoking section, a cover charge, a swinging door, a till

To reckon. Those days we didn't have a prayer, separated our love
From each other like cupping a yolk between the cracked half

Shells back & again until it's perfect. Forgive ourselves. Give
Ourselves the tenderest title & call it a day. How could we ever

How could we not. Baby, draw the spoked sun in the corner
Of our afternoon sky. Wake us in its slow-cooked gaze.

—Amy Woolard

mired in disbelief and depression; she rehearsed telling Ahmed that she wanted a divorce, imagining his shock, his grief. Both sets of parents vowed to disown the couple if he wouldn't renounce ISIS. To prove it, they acted as if they didn't know Jihan when they passed her on the street. But Ahmed had stood by her when they couldn't conceive. Jihan couldn't abandon him, even if he was making a terrible mistake; indeed, she would stay with him precisely *because* he was making a mistake, since it was such moments, she told herself, that made love meaningful. She hoped to keep reminding him that there was a realm beyond air strikes and mutilated bodies, somewhere.

"We're going to lose our families," she told him one day. "Please don't do this."

He took her hand. "Maybe we'll lose our families," he said. "But we will be doing the right thing, and that's what matters."

A few months later, Jihan and Ahmed moved to Raqqa, the capital of the Islamic State's self-declared caliphate.

The Islamic State at its height controlled nearly a third of Syrian territory and forty per cent of Iraq, and ruled over some ten million people. In addition to the front-line fighters who battled rival Syrian and Iraqi factions, thousands of functionaries engaged in such mundane bureaucratic tasks as collecting taxes and conducting restaurant food-safety inspections. The caliphate's system of laws, which was as intricate as that of any established state, included the provision that women cover fully in public. Jihan loathed wearing the niqab so much that she rarely left the house. Ahmed asked her to bear it, as if they were immigrants in a foreign culture. He was often away at the front lines, returning only once or twice a month, usually without warning. Jihan had grown up surrounded by siblings and in-laws; she'd never slept in an empty house a day in her life. Though she had acquired a smattering of friends by working as a seamstress, each evening she sank back into a terrible loneliness. She grew obsessed with having children, but she and Ahmed still couldn't conceive. They visited several doctors, who declared them medically sound. One said that their condition was God's will.

Whenever Ahmed came home, he was withdrawn. "He hated life in general," Jihan recalled. When she prepared his favorite meal—*mahshi*, stuffed vegetables—he ate without pleasure. He stared blankly into his phone, then slept for twelve hours straight. He hardly even looked at her anymore. She saw him smile only when he heard news of regime losses. When Jihan asked about his work, he refused to discuss it—and she felt relieved, because she didn't really want to know. She tried to imagine

they were living a normal life, that he was going off to do construction or farming, that a child was on the way. Within her four walls, it was easy to forget that a war raged in other cities. But she couldn't forget her former life in Homs. One call from her father would have been enough. None came.

Ahmed must have noticed her despondency, because he began taking her out: hiking along the Euphrates, shopping in the souks. The couple were seen together so often that when Ahmed's comrades spotted him out alone they teased, "You forgot your weapon at home." Still, he was rarely on leave, and Jihan wouldn't go out by herself. In this shrunken universe, she lost track of time. Two, three years passed.

Then, in 2017, the war came to Raqqa. Though the city was an ISIS bastion, there were many residents, especially poor ones, who opposed the group but lacked the resources to escape. American jets pounded the city; ISIS forces shot back from rooftops. Jihan huddled at home while Ahmed was off fighting. The American barrage struck ISIS locations and civilian homes alike. A coalition bomb slammed into a residential building in Jihan's neighborhood, nearly wiping out four families living there; twenty children died. A week later, a strike hit another nearby building, killing twenty-seven civilians. Explosions rocked the city day and night, and Jihan hardly slept.

Finally, Ahmed returned home. He frantically loaded their possessions into a car, and drove with Jihan through a vista of extraordinary devastation: some eleven thousand buildings—mosques, schools, water towers—were in ruins. Amnesty International, which tracked civilian deaths resulting from the battle, later called Raqqa the "most destroyed city in modern times." Ahmed and Jihan headed south. She recalled, "A bomb hit a building on a street we were passing, and I saw with my own eyes a crib thrown onto the street. Ahmed stopped the car and went to check on it. There was a baby inside, and it was still alive. Ahmed told me, 'Do you see who we are fighting?' He was very upset, and he was pointing to the sky: 'What did this baby do?' He was shaking."

After leaving the infant with neighbors, they drove to Deir ez-Zor, a province deep in the heart of the caliphate and far from the bombing. It was the poorest corner of Syria; malaria and polio were rampant. The accents were rustic and guttural. Ahmed returned to the front and Jihan resumed tailoring. He was gone for longer and longer stretches. She tried desperately to imagine a better future, but these thoughts were impossibly imbricated with her past. In her mind, she was having a Friday picnic in Homs, and she was chasing after Sarah and her boys, scolding them, feeding them *kibbe*.

One morning, there was a knock on the door. Jihan opened it to find a group of Islamic State fighters. "Are you Ahmed Ali Saleh's wife?" one asked. She nodded. "May God have mercy on him and bless him. He was martyred."

Jihan wasn't sure what to say. "Where is his body?" she asked.

"We buried it," one said, and then they left.

The moments after this were a haze. At some point, Jihan fainted. Neighbors must have noticed her in distress. They took turns spending the night with her. Sometimes she talked about waiting for Ahmed to come home, as if she'd only imagined his death. When the truth bore down, she fainted again. In the depths of her mourning, she considered reaching out to her parents, but the dread of rejection stopped her. "If I called my father and heard his voice and he told me I wasn't his daughter, it would break my heart into pieces," she said. Occasionally, she imagined she'd given birth to a child who had Ahmed's scent. She

lost all desire to leave the house. Her neighbors tried to persuade her to move in with them, or at least come for meals, but she refused.

One day in 2018, a woman who lived next door to Jihan was stoking a clay oven on her roof. As the woman called to her four children down below to help their father load the car, an air strike rocked the house. Jihan raced over. The woman had been thrown from the roof. "Don't check on me!" she screamed. "Check my children!" But her entire family was dead. Jihan stared at the children's little bodies and was suddenly gripped by a rage she'd never felt before. She realized, for the first time, that she hated Ahmed—for his stubbornness, his zealotry, his bloodlust, his willingness to destroy her life. She hated her parents, who, she told me, had "tossed us out like garbage." She hated her government for plunging her country into horror. She hated the Americans, the U.N., and the entire world, and she swore that she'd never cry for anyone, or anything, again.

Jihan began leaving the house, and she resumed tailoring with a furious intensity, though she couldn't say what for. The sound of warplanes grew closer, but she no longer cared. She befriended one of her customers, who introduced her to her brother, a divorced tuk-tuk mechanic named Mahmoud. He not only detested ISIS—he repudiated every side of the conflict. At first, Jihan resisted any thought of romance. But after weeks of contemplation she decided that there was only one way to bury the memory of Ahmed. She married Mahmoud in a small ceremony. There had been no courtship—indeed, hardly any discussion between them—but she couldn't remain alone.

Soon afterward, the war reached Deir ez-Zor. Pro-regime forces sent jets thundering overhead, and ordnance crashed down at random. Jihan and Mahmoud decided to take refuge in the countryside, where Mahmoud had relatives. As they were leaving, a staggering explosion nearly overturned their vehicle. Jihan looked back to see their house ablaze.

The next day, they stole back to the house. It was in ashes. Their possessions, including their identification papers, had been incinerated.

The couple moved from village to village, fleeing the advancing front line and venturing deeper into the caliphate. Tens of thousands of families were doing the same—ISIS was barring civilians from leaving its territory. But nowhere was truly safe; one day, coalition warplanes struck the hamlet where Jihan and Mahmoud were sheltering, turning the village into an inferno. As they gathered their belongings to flee again, an air strike hit a nearby building; the blast threw Jihan to the ground, and shrap-

nel just missed her, cleaving a nearby tree. Mahmoud carried her to the car, and they raced off.

There was no choice but to try to escape the caliphate. They joined hundreds of other families trekking through the desert; many had paid their life savings to smugglers, who guided them around ISIS checkpoints. The caravan proceeded northwest, toward Raqqa, and finally arrived at a checkpoint of the U.S.-backed Kurdish forces. The travellers—who included the sick, the wounded, the pregnant, the dying—begged the soldiers to take them in. The soldiers demanded identification documents, which Jihan and Mahmoud no longer had. In any event, almost none of the people in the caravan were admitted. Most of them were arrested and loaded into cargo trucks. Jihan, who hadn't eaten in days, was barely conscious. After many hours, the trucks were unloaded. Jihan and her husband stood shivering under floodlights, and were informed that the name of their new home was Al-Hol.

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In 2006, the Syrian government settled a few hundred Palestinian refugee families on a dusty, scorpion-infested stretch of brushland near the Iraqi border, south of the town of Al-Hol, which means, among other things, "the horror." The Palestinians had been living in Iraq but fled the violence unleashed by the U.S. occupation; they had already been expelled from their ancestral lands by Israel in 1948. The U.N. built cinderblock houses for the refugees. During the Syrian civil war, the camp filled with more displaced families. In March, 2019, when the caliphate fell, thousands of its residents were corralled into Al-Hol, and the camp was abruptly converted into one of the world's largest prisons. Today, Al-Hol's fifty thousand residents are grouped into sectors divided by barbed wire; to walk from one to the next can take half an hour. Most sectors hold Syrians and Iraqis, but the so-called Annex is home to about six thousand Europeans, Asians, and Africans, some of whom have been denied repatriation by their home governments. Horticulture is evident here and there around the camp, with squash and bean plants peeking over tents. A few non-governmental organizations operate health clinics, but detainees complain that malnutrition and water-borne disease are pervasive. Crowds jostle around bathrooms whose pipes are often clogged. Many inmates receive money from relatives—*hawala* networks, informal cash-transfer systems, are sometimes allowed to relay funds to prisoners. Detainees can use their remittances to buy smuggled goods, including drugs. The chief diversion is the souk, which was built by inmates, and in which you'll find small grocers next to carts selling makeup next to smoothie stands. A few lucky prisoners own shops, but most stalls are run by outsiders with permits to enter the camp. A mass of black-clad women drifts among the stalls, examining bras, haggling over cigarettes. You can guess who the true believers are: the women who cover not only their faces but also their eyes tend to be loyal to ISIS.

When Jihan and Mahmoud moved to their assigned tent, Jihan was surprised to find many detainees with stories like hers. The common denominator appeared to be guilt by association. There was a woman from central Syria named Fatima; her husband had joined the democracy protests and then, through the twists and turns of the war, had ended up in ISIS. Her family insisted that she divorce him, but they had a child, and, according to local custom, custody goes to the man, so she refused—and was disowned. Eventually, Fatima's husband died in battle, and she was transferred against her will to a "guest house" for ISIS widows. There she rebuffed ISIS suitors, wanting only to be reunited with her family. During America's bombing campaign, she was moved from village to village by ISIS, and she ended up living in a ditch as ordnance exploded around her. Now she and her child were in Al-Hol, surviving on camp rations, as she waited for a sign from her family. She hadn't spoken to them in four years.

Jihan met Da'ad, who was also from Homs. Her family, which was not linked to ISIS, had fled regime air strikes for Raqqa, then kept moving east to escape U.S. bombs. One day, she and her children travelled to visit her parents; they returned home to find that a coalition

"Ah, I see you're trying to vent. May I offer you some annoyingly pragmatic solutions?"

• •

air strike had blown up their house. Seventeen people were killed, among them her husband and her in-laws. Now she lives in a tent with her daughters, including a nine-year-old who has a blood disorder and requires transfusions to stay alive. Transfusions are performed at a hospital outside the camp, but an emergency furlough from the authorities is maddeningly difficult to obtain, and Da'ad, who works at a grocery in the souk, can't always afford the treatments. She has appealed to neighbors and to aid organizations in the camp, without success. "I can't watch my child withering away in front of me day after day," she said. "This is a prison, not a camp. I don't know what crime my daughter committed."

Local authorities did not comment on conditions in the camp. The U.S. State Department said in a statement that the "humanitarian needs at Al-Hol camp are vast and the international response is underfunded," and noted that the U.S. is "committed to helping the international community address this shared security and humanitarian challenge."

I tracked down eyewitnesses and collected corroborating evidence for the strikes that Da'ad and other prisoners described. (The Pentagon declined to comment.) Under U.S. law, civilians harmed in American military actions can be eligible for condolence payments. But most inmates don't believe that they will ever see a dollar—and they hardly even think about the remote and seemingly toothless world of foreign laws. Afflicted by images they cannot unsee, they must take comfort in the knowledge that the haunting is shared.

Asma was from a stretch of Iraq that was overtaken by ISIS. When U.S.-backed forces closed in on her village, she and her husband, a taxi-driver, fled with their two daughters; her two brothers had joined ISIS, and she and her husband feared being branded sympathizers. They took refuge in Syria. Not long afterward, Asma's husband was in a traffic accident. "I went running to the hospital crying," she recalled. He died from his injuries. "I saw his body and hugged him and kept screaming." Five months later, she went to visit a friend. When she returned home, she saw people gathered in front of her house. It was in smoldering ruins, from an air strike by pro-government forces. Both her daughters were dead. "I buried them in the dirt with my own hands," Asma said. "They were little girls, the age of flowers." Because a woman cannot live alone, Asma moved in with her brothers Mustafa and Saleh, the ISIS members, who, with their families, had taken up residence in Syria. She tried to suppress her grief, playing with her nieces and nephews and helping out around the house. One evening, she went to bed around midnight, and woke up in the hospital; Saleh was by her side, crying. He told her, "We are the only survivors." Asma recalled, "I did not even feel the fractures in my hands and feet. I was screaming, 'Where is Mustafa? Where are the boys and girls!'" Another air strike had wiped out the rest of her family, killing twelve people, nine of them children. She and Saleh fled to a different village, but two months later he was killed in a coalition air strike. In Al-Hol, Asma lived in a tent alone.

I met a young man named Hassan, who was a child when the civil war started; he hailed from western Syria but, through a series of displacements, wound up in the eastern part of the country. ISIS fighters commandeered the ground floor of the apartment building where he lived with his parents and siblings. Residents begged the militants to leave, but they refused. The residents had nowhere to go, so they remained in their homes. One day, Hassan was talking with his brothers when he heard warplanes. "I woke up to find myself under rubble, trapped between stones and iron," he recalled. "I started calling for my parents, but nobody answered. My brother was next to me. And I then saw that he was not even a complete body. It was half a body, only the upper half, from his chest to his head." Three days later, at the hospital, he was told that a coalition bomb had killed ten members of his family, including his parents: "I started howling, and the nurse

tried to calm me and remind me of God."

Deyaa was an Iraqi from Heet, a city that became part of the caliphate. He worked in livestock. One day, he and his wife drove beyond the city limits to collect fodder, and they took their children along. At dusk, as they were returning home, they noticed jets flying low. A terrific blast hit the roadside. Deyaa could no longer hear or see anything. He screamed his wife's name but got no answer. Her head had been split open. Shrapnel had ripped apart his children's bodies.

After several surgeries, Deyaa survived. "When they took me home, I couldn't bring myself to enter—I just stood outside crying," he said. "I stood like this for a long time, long enough for people to worry that I was losing my mind." He made multiple attempts to escape the caliphate, but was eventually detained by Kurdish forces and shipped to Al-Hol. He said of his family, "They were the most valuable things I had, and the Americans took them away from me."

Inmates who had never committed a crime still tended to blame themselves for their predicament—they'd fallen in love with the wrong man, sought refuge in the wrong town. Jihan was overtaken by bitterness and self-reproach. Should she have listened to her parents? Should she have forced Ahmed to quit ISIS? But how? Using a friend's phone, she tried to contact her family, but they had changed their numbers. She had convinced herself that if she could only comprehend Ahmed's path into ISIS, she could somehow rid herself of his stain. But nobody in Al-Hol had known him, and the authorities had no record of him.

To better understand Ahmed's story myself, one afternoon I visited a tent not far from Jihan's, where Abu Hassan, an Islamic State commander, lived. He was a heavyset man with a stern, watchful expression, and I found it easy to imagine him in a grainy jihadi video. His tent was larger than most, provisioned with embroidered floor cushions and velvet drapes. I'd heard that he came from an impoverished family in central Syria, and he confirmed this, describing a childhood spent on the streets with local toughs. "We drank, we smoked," he told me. "We never talked about Islamic ideas." They labored for pennies as pushcart venders and construction workers. He got a job painting the sides of buildings, and enjoyed "hanging between land and sky."

When the revolution erupted, Abu Hassan and his friends joined the protests. "None of us had any idea about the Islamic State," he recalled. "We were very poor, so we just wanted better jobs, a better economic situation, and freedom of expression." After several people were detained and then brutalized in regime dungeons, he concluded that peaceful resistance was futile. He and his friends collected donations door to door, bought a few old hunting rifles, and declared themselves a unit of the Free Syrian Army.

As the uprising mutated into war, Abu Hassan found himself on the front lines, sleeping in bombed-out buildings and dodging mortars. At first, Free Syrian Army units received a hero's welcome wherever they went. But in time the exigencies of fund-raising pushed rebel units—most of which lacked foreign backing—into thievery. He considered quitting. But then a right-wing battalion, Ahrar al-Sham, appeared on the scene; the group, which had a flush arsenal donated by Gulf states, didn't have to resort to looting. Abu Hassan's unit joined en masse. For the first time, Abu Hassan was surrounded by young men who spoke of order and responsibility. It was here that he initially heard Islamic ideas; he was amazed to see comrades act as if they were accountable to something greater than themselves.

Before long, ISIS emerged, announcing its intention to build a state that would promote justice and care for the poor. Abu Hassan and his crew signed up. He was unacquainted with the group's global ambitions, hadn't read a word of jihadi literature and knew none of its catechisms—such as "death to the rejectionists," the Shia. But the terrible bloodshed of the previous years had unsettled all precepts of right and wrong, and it was ISIS's message of order, in a world seemingly turned upside down, that resonated with Abu Hassan.

The most commonly told story of ISIS recruitment starts with a lone teen-ager in a Western country, watching YouTube clips in his bedroom and succumbing to indoctrination, then rushing off to wage jihad. There are those who fit this narrative, but the vast majority of ISIS recruits were Iraqis and Syrians, most of whom hadn't had the slightest inclination toward religious extremism before they joined. As I met Abu Hassan and dozens like him in Al-Hol, various archetypes revealed themselves: the rebel who, closing his eyes and seeing the ghosts of dead relatives, is bent on revenge; the poor worker suffering the humiliations of a profoundly unequal society, then suddenly commanding fear and respect; the teen-ager looking for excitement who calculates that, by growing a rugged beard and sporting a bandolier, he might impress the neighborhood girls.

When religious radicalization occurred, it usually happened *after* a person joined ISIS. Membership in a militant organization can be a powerful socializing experience, rewiring one's ideas about reality. That seemed to be the case with Abu Hassan. He was assigned to the ISIS secret police—the caliphate's gestapo—and tasked with arresting his former pro-democracy allies. By all accounts, Abu Hassan morphed into a feared enforcer, his unit snatching citizens off the streets. According to some sources, at one point he was responsible for half the arrests in a city in the Aleppo governorate. Those people judged guilty were often marched to a field or an alley, sometimes in groups, and executed by firing squad. Their bodies were dumped in unmarked mass graves.

Many of the people arrested weren't involved in the war. I located a falafel seller who'd been detained by Abu Hassan. He'd been accused of taking up arms against ISIS—a charge he'd found so absurd he almost wanted to laugh. Then ISIS investigators "hung me by a rope and started beating me," he recalled. "They broke two of my bones, and I could breathe only with difficulty." He was placed in a windowless box so tiny that he couldn't sit down, and every so often he was taken out to be tortured again. He was released after nine months.

The falafel seller was fortunate; many people seized by ISIS never made it out. I collected the names of dozens of individuals arrested by Abu Hassan who weren't heard from again. Their families are still searching for them. When I mentioned the names to Abu Hassan, he said that he hadn't killed

them personally, but they were all dead.

In the ideologically sundry society of Al-Hol, Abu Hassan had moderated his persona. He'd acted as a mediator between the community and the religious police, defending an aid organization's construction of a school. The caliphate had become a distant memory. Abu Hassan had lost his worldly possessions and was living in a squalid camp. What did he now make of his grisly career? "I will never say I regret arresting those people, because our duty was to rule in the name of God," he said. It was a matter of following the law. "If I'm in Las Vegas, and I commit a crime, and the punishment for this crime is death, what law will I be judged under? Las Vegas law, not Islamic law, of course." In the same way, he explained, he'd merely been obeying orders. But sometimes in my conversations with Abu Hassan I detected flashes of brio, even pride: he had been an unremarkable, even disreputable, youth before the war, and in his view he and his comrades had done the extraordinary by burning conventional morality to the ground. When I asked about ISIS's treatment of such minorities as the Shia, he said, "They are like a disease, and the only cure is to kill them. The cure of the disease is the sword of justice."

Not long after arriving in Al-Hol, ISIS true believers easily cowed the other inmates, who were shell-shocked, heartbroken, and in mourning. The Islamic State's men and women—more women, because the men were mostly dead or in other prisons—sought to resurrect the caliphate within the camp itself. Supporters on the outside took up collections for their imprisoned "sisters." Female detainees formed the religious police, Al-Hisba, which targeted prostitution and other alleged misdeeds, often dragging women away on real or imagined charges. ISIS judges meted out sentences, including execution; before long, four to five people were being killed a month, most by unknown assailants. ISIS agents burned down N.G.O.-run schools and clinics. They murdered aid workers and assassinated suspected collaborators, like Hamid al-Shummari. The aim was to sever links to the outside world, rendering the camp population dependent on ISIS members and making it easier to cajole inmates, especially children, into joining the group.

ISIS cells are active in every sector of Al-Hol, but the heart of this mini-caliphate is the Annex, where non-Iraqi foreign nationals tend to reside. Many of the women there, unlike those in the rest of the camp, chose to join the Islamic State; they are among the most extreme of the true believers. One afternoon I toured the Annex, which is set apart from the other sectors. Tents were clustered together and encircled by alleys, forming little neighborhoods. Graffiti covered the walls in an array of languages. There was hardly a woman about. As I walked down the main street, I noticed eyes watching me through openings in the tents. Here and there, I saw children: sitting in a sewage ditch, gathered around a well. I approached a pair of boys, one blond and the other with East Asian features. They couldn't have been more than four or five years old. I asked them where they were from, and the blond boy replied, in stilted, formal Arabic, "We don't speak to infidels." As I was leaving, I felt a sharp pain in my shoulder blade and turned to see rocks flying toward me. More boys appeared, eager to take part in the stoning. I ran.

I ended up deeper in the Annex, near a school that had been built by an aid group. It was now abandoned, after warnings from ISIS cells. A woman appeared. Speaking with a Lebanese accent, she told me she'd moved her tent by the school because other women in the Annex had threatened to kill her for not wearing a niqab. And she was just as afraid of the children, some of whom had been in the camp long enough to grow into teen-agers and terrorize residents.

The Kurdish authorities, who lack the manpower to enforce security, manage the camp's nine sectors through occasional raids. Sometimes these operations net ISIS commanders accused of plotting attacks beyond the camp's fences; occasionally, they have liberated enslaved Yazidi women. But the authorities are so under-resourced that they tend to treat the entire population as hostile. Detainees live in fear of raids; soldiers have beaten people in front of their tents. In Sector 5, I met a woman whose seven-year-old boy had been playing near the perimeter fence, then had crawled under it to pick wildflowers on the other side. Guards had shot him dead. "He was waiting to celebrate Eid," she wept. "I had bought Eid clothes for him."

When Jihan heard about this killing, which occurred not far from her tent, it brought back memories of the air strike near her house—the small bodies of children tossed about. Her desire to squeeze a child in her arms, to hear the word "mother," was overpowering. She and Mahmoud were unable to conceive—an affliction all the more cutting in the camp, where it's impossible to step out of a tent without running into children. Most do not attend school, and there are few diversions. You might see teen-age boys aimlessly hurling rocks into the distance. Younger children splash around in ditches or play with mud.

I met Tahir, a shy and polite four-year-old with large eyes. He was born in the camp; his father, who had belonged to ISIS, vanished in the bowels of the prison system. In Al-Hol, meanwhile, his mother was accused by ISIS members of collaborating with authorities. One evening, she was marched to a sewage ditch and shot. Tahir is now in the care of an ailing grandmother. I asked him if he knew what ISIS was, and he shook his head. I asked if he wanted to leave the camp, and he again shook his head.

For many children, the realm beyond the camp fence is mysterious, and possibly dangerous. I spoke to dozens of children, and they knew next to nothing about life outside Al-Hol. Many had not heard of Syria, Iraq, America, or even television. (When Abu Hassan, the ISIS commander, smuggled in a flat-screen television, his daughter exclaimed, "Look how big that phone is!") I met Aisha, a seven-year-old, who explained that she was from Aleppo, but when I asked her what Aleppo was she drew a blank. She didn't know why she was in the camp, and her days consisted of getting in line early to use the bathroom

and of avoiding security guards, whom she believed would shoot if she got close. Naser, six years old, wasn't sure what distinguished a camp from other living arrangements. Another child boasted that she'd once seen "moving drawings," which I guessed was a cartoon, and she queried where she might see more. I asked a group of children if they'd ever seen a clown; one child said yes, but I realized that he was talking about a smuggler—in Arabic, the words sound similar. I explained what a clown looks like—white face paint, red nose—which inspired much discussion. A child announced that she had indeed seen such a being, but she called it a "snow bear," and described a creature made of ice, with a carrot for a nose. Internet connections at Al-Hol are sporadic, hitting the camp like gusts of wind, and she must have seen a video on a phone. I asked the children what they thought lay beyond the fence. Among the answers I received: "nothing," "hungry people," "dogs," "soldiers," "stairs," "houses," "gardens," "infidels," "my father."

Last spring, I arranged to bring clowns to perform for the children of Al-Hol. But, just as we were loading our car to head for the camp, two of the clowns dropped out, offering vague excuses. That left only Ali Batran, a portly man with a mischievous grin who hails from central Syria. During the caliphate's rule, Ali was arrested five times for hawking cigarettes; once, he received forty-five lashings and was enrolled in a Sharia reëducation course. Still, unlike his compadres, he had no qualms about visiting a camp filled with his former tormentors. "Children are children," Ali said. Besides, he could use the work; like everything else in Syria, the clowning industry had been degraded by years of war.

Ali felt that it was unnatural to perform solo. "Clowning is all about the collective," he explained. I suggested that he recruit our driver, Abu Reem. Ali agreed, but he was particular about his art and insisted that Abu Reem undertake a few quick rehearsals. He was also keen that I not confuse Abu Reem with a professional clown, though he admitted that he, too, was something of a novice in the field. Ali had grown up poor, and as a child, looking for "an escape from the intense psychological pressure," he discovered the theatre. He'd been landing roles in a variety of productions until the war put an end to all that. He'd hardly clowned in recent years, and now mainly worked polishing tiles.

In Al-Hol, several prisoners volunteered to gather children and prepare a tent. I also needed someone who could keep ISIS cells at bay, so I approached Abu Hassan. He'd expressed no remorse in our conversations, but I nonetheless suspected that he harbored doubts. The smuggled TV in his tent played wildlife videos on loop—lions stalking gazelles, snakes swallowing mice—and one day I asked about it. He told me they were for his daughters, aged six and eight. "I don't want them to make the mistakes we made," he said. "I want them to know about the world." He wouldn't say what these mistakes were. But he allowed that the suppression of clowns, which were haram in the caliphate, was overreach. "Clowns are good," he said.

On the day of the show, the sun was brilliant and children crowded outside a U.N.-issued tent serving as a big top. Abu Hassan arranged the boys and girls into lines. No performance had ever been given in the camp, and the children discussed what they might see. One girl suggested that there was no such thing as a clown, that it was a ruse to get them to school. A boy said that he'd heard clowns came bearing gifts. I asked what he wished for most in the world, and he said a soccer ball. A boy standing nearby, who looked to be six or seven, raised his index finger—a gesture of the Islamic State.

Some thirty kids crammed inside: young boys in tracksuits, little girls in head scarves or niqabs. Balloons were littered about. Behind a partition, Ali and Abu Reem were assembling their costumes. More children were trying to force their way into the tent, which was at capacity, but Abu Hassan and his friends held them back. The commander looked pleased with himself about the crowd control.

Suddenly, a whistle pierced the air, and Ali appeared among the children. There were shouts of confusion. A girl in a leopard-print scarf burst into tears and fled in terror. Ali wore a neon wig, and a red nose that kept popping off. In the heat, his makeup ran, making him look like something that might poke its head out of a sewer. I asked him to sneak off for a touch-up, and he returned in better form, goose-stepping with Abu Reem. The clowns distributed candies, sang songs, cracked jokes; slowly, the children were won over. They began singing along. The boy who'd raised his index finger danced. The leopard-print girl reappeared, laughing and clapping.

Ali and Abu Reem retreated behind the partition for the second act: a puppet show. They engaged sock puppets in a complex drama about belonging and tolerance, following a script that

"Wi-Fi outages are the new snow days!"

Ali had apparently written. I asked Ali why he needed to be in full clown regalia while hiding behind a curtain; he told me that that was just the way things were. I left the tent and saw Abu Hassan, who hailed the event as a success: for a few moments, the children had been transported. "They forgot where they are," he said. "This is a great gift."

Suddenly, there was a shout. A woman in a black niqab was cracking a whip in the air, trying to force her way into the tent. Al-Hisba—the religious police. Her eyes screwed up in fury, she declared, "This is devil worship!" Abu Hassan tried to reason with her, arguing that the children had no other source of entertainment, but she unleashed a torrent of abuse. I cancelled the remainder of the show. Ali and Abu Reem gathered their accoutrements, and, as the woman threatened Abu Hassan with death, we fled.

One day, back when Hamid al-Shummari was still alive, Jihan received visitors. It was the pit of winter; freezing rain pounded the polyester and the muddy lanes, turning the camp into a squelching bog. A young woman entered the tent. She looked to be about eighteen years old. Her name was Rachel, and she told Jihan that she'd been enslaved by ISIS. Jihan had been living in the camp for nearly a year, but she couldn't shake the memory of Ahmed, and in her grief and anger sought expiation. She had offered her tent as temporary shelter for ISIS victims, where they could talk through their trauma before moving into a tent of their own.

Rachel was accompanied by a girl named Raba, around three years old, whom she introduced as a friend's orphaned daughter. Raba said to Jihan, "How are you, Auntie?," and kissed her on the cheek. The child was dripping wet and shivering. Jihan found some dry clothes and swaddled Raba, who thanked her profusely. Jihan had never met a young child so stolid and polite; Mahmoud was also charmed by what he called her "sweet tongue," and wondered where she could possibly have learned such graceful manners. Raba fell asleep in Jihan's lap. Jihan carried her to the mattress on the floor, and, as she wrapped the child tight in a blanket, she felt her heart surge.

During her stay with Jihan and Mahmoud, Rachel gave contradictory stories of Raba's origin. What was clear, though, was that the child was attached to Rachel, cuddling up next to her to sleep. After a few weeks, Rachel won her release from Al-Hol, through the intervention of a church. But she wasn't permitted to take Raba, so she asked to leave her in Jihan's care, promising to fetch her later. Jihan and Mahmoud agreed.

At first, Raba was inconsolable; once a week, Jihan arranged for her to speak with Rachel on a friend's cell phone. But as the months passed the calls became less frequent, and finally Rachel ceased communicating altogether. When Jihan showed Rachel's picture to Raba and asked if she missed her, Raba shook her head. "She stopped talking to me," the girl said.

Raba was keenly perceptive, and she was eager to help Jihan and Mahmoud around the tent. Yet there was something forlorn about her: she didn't play in the ditches like the other kids; in fact, she hardly even stepped outside. Jihan sensed that Raba needed shielding, though she wasn't sure from what. She now dreaded the thought of getting a phone call from Rachel—or, worse, of someone showing up to claim Raba.

One day, Raba asked, "Why don't we make *tannour* bread anymore?" The wood-fired flatbread is a specialty of country homes with clay ovens. Jihan had never baked *tannour*, and had no idea how it was made. "How do you not know? We used to make this bread," Raba said, and proceeded to give step-by-step instructions.

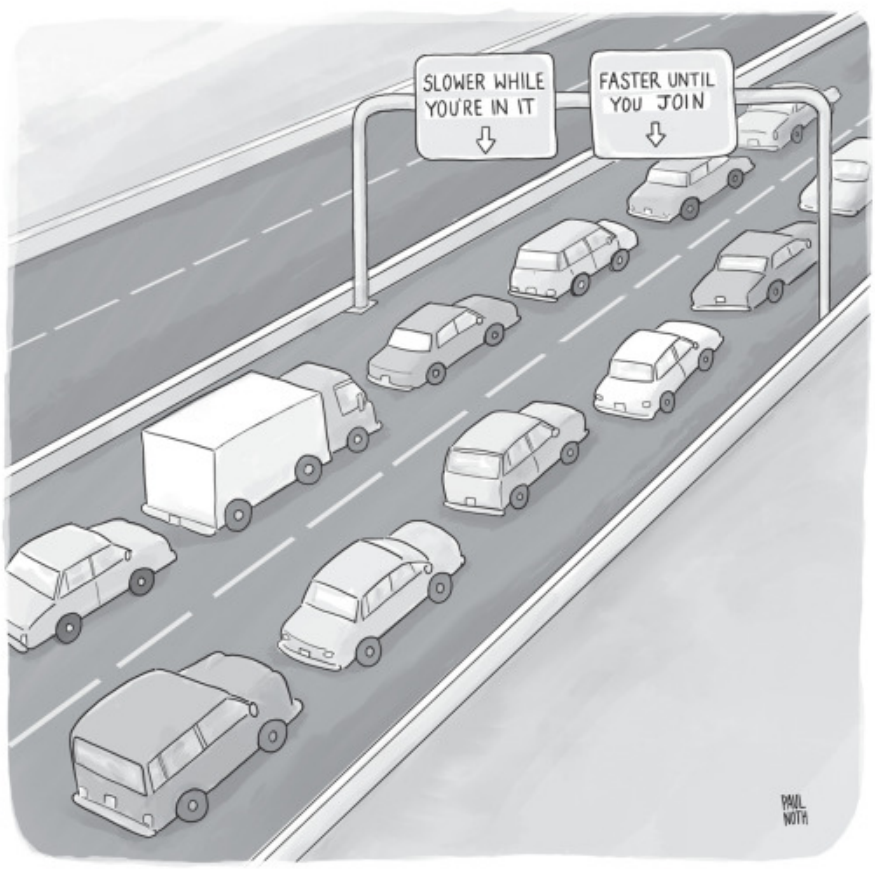
Once, Jihan was in the tent when the earth shook. She emerged into the daylight to see the belly of a jet swooping directly above her. Suddenly, she heard Raba shouting, "Mama! Come back, Mama!" The word must have jolted through Jihan; no one had ever called her that.

Inside the tent, Raba was trembling. "The plane is here!" she shouted. Jihan held her and told her not to be afraid. Raba, eyes pooling, said, "Don't you remember how the plane came?"

"It's nothing," Jihan said. "Come, let's say hello to the pilot."

Raba refused to budge. "Don't you remember how the plane bombed us!" she demanded.

In the course of many months, Jihan



pieced together the story of Raba's past, which I subsequently confirmed and expanded on. Raba had lived in the countryside in eastern Syria, and her father may have been affiliated with ISIS. One day at dawn, Raba's mother went outside to perform ablutions and took her along. Her mother must have heard coalition jets, because she hugged Raba protectively. Bombs struck the house. When rescuers arrived, Raba was found unconscious in her mother's arms. Her mother was dead—an iron pipe in her back—and so were Raba's father and her siblings. Raba was rushed to the hospital, and then, along with other orphaned children, shipped to Al-Hol. In the camp, she was discovered by Rachel, who had known her parents.

Jihan noticed the trace of a scar above Raba's forehead, and her jumpiness at sudden sounds. She took Raba to a Ukrainian pediatrician—a woman who'd happened to be living in eastern Syria when the caliphate emerged, and was then banished to Al-Hol when ISIS's empire collapsed. The doctor advised Jihan to tell Raba that her memories were all a dream, or a nightmare, and that she was safe now. In her tent, Jihan watched Raba exploring behind the curtain, fiddling with the crockery, and sleeping in a tight ball on the floor cushion, and knew that she was watching her own daughter.

Adoption, however, was almost impossible. Jihan had no papers. Raba had no papers. In fact, as far as the camp's books were concerned, Raba likely didn't even exist. For a while, Jihan had placed hope in Hamid al-Shummari, who worked his official contacts to try to register Raba as Jihan's daughter. But, with Hamid's murder, that door had violently slammed shut. Now Jihan began to realize that if she were somehow released she would be forced to leave Raba behind. Jihan had lost a husband, her parents, her brothers and sisters, her friends, her home, even her freedom—she couldn't lose this little girl. She could no longer think of Al-Hol as a prison or a way station: it had to be her home. Here, she would raise her daughter, teaching her to read and write. She would watch Raba get married, and she would welcome grandchildren. Her bones would grow old, and she would be buried somewhere beneath the floodlights and the watchtowers.

If Jihan's limbo felt permanent, it mirrored the world around her. Many of her neighbors, rafted together by war and dictatorship, and imprisoned for the sins of their husbands and fathers, have nowhere to return to. Their homes have been destroyed, or they have been disowned by family. Others elect to survive on camp rations rather than brave the ravages outside. The camp is in a region of eastern Syria controlled by Kurdish forces, who aren't recognized by any government. The territory's four million or so people are effectively stateless. Syria itself is merely lines on a map; as a nation, it no longer exists. The country is carved into three zones—one occupied by Russia and Iran, another by Turkey, the third by the United States—and each territory has its guns pointed at the others. It's possible, and perhaps even comforting, for Western politicians to see all this as the best of bad options, as responsible statecraft. For long periods of time, the iniquities of the Middle East can appear frozen, and, therefore, manageable. A tyrannical government, bankrolled by foreign powers, stifles all political life; a theocracy seeks to commandeer body and soul; an occupying power dispossesses a native population, then subjects it to daily degradations. But at unpredictable moments these injustices erupt into the open—and into our consciousness—through great upheavals, or wanton acts of violence. We then ask where the rage comes from, even though it has been simmering under our noses all along.

This past autumn, I brought clowns back to Al-Hol. Ali Batran was eager to reprise his role, and had recruited two other performers. This time, I prevailed upon Abu Hassan, the ISIS commander, to tap into his network to hold off the religious police. I also had a fence erected around the big top. Ahmed al-Shummari, the adult son of Hamid, was there, helping supervise the children. Abu Hassan had brought his daughters, who wore matching Minnie Mouse jackets. Standing apart from the scrum, looking dignified in a sun hat and bracelets, was Raba. I introduced myself. As I described what the show would be like, she studied me with large, alert eyes. She was quiet but not shy; she told me that her favorite animal was a rabbit, and that she had been born in Homs.

Although it was blazingly hot, children squeezed into the tent: girls in ponytails and flower dresses, boys in tank tops and track pants. I spoke to an eight-year-old boy with long, lustrous hair; he told me that he belonged to the Cubs of the Caliphate—an ISIS youth group—and, with barely stifled ebullience, said that he'd never seen a clown.

With the blast of a horn, a voice bellowed, "Are you ready?" The children roared. Ali and his comrades burst through the curtain as Turkmen music blared on the stereo. The children took turns waltzing with the clowns and tumbling and tripping on Ali's oversized shoes, provoking a riot of laughter. Abu Hassan's girls stepped to the center. In an open flap, their father's face appeared. "Don't be shy," he said, smiling. As drums pounded, the clowns coaxed Raba to the center. She swayed her hips in a tentative dance. The clowns waved gossamer scarves in the air, Ali's nose popped off, and I saw a smile on Raba's face.

Ali goose-stepped out of the tent, the children following as if he were the Pied Piper. One of the clowns, a teenage girl waddling about in a penguin suit, produced a hula hoop, a device heretofore unknown in Al-Hol. Many of the kids were desperate to give it a whirl, but Raba wasn't interested—she'd befriended Abu Hassan's daughters. They drifted from the throng, playing something like ring-around-the-rosy among themselves. Then they sat in the shade. Raba showed off her bracelets and asked about the girls' tent. How many partitions did it contain? In the gravel, she sketched her own tent, and said, proudly, "We have a kitchen."

One of Abu Hassan's daughters told Raba that she wanted to come over but didn't know how to get there. Raba stretched out her arm: "We live all the way over there." She was pointing past the tents, the guard towers, the barbed-wire fence, and the gravel road separating the sections—a distance of a kilometre, and the breadth of the known universe. "It's really, really far," Raba said. "But you'll like my home." ♦

LETTER FROM CALIFORNIA

O.K., DOOMER

Some people want to build A.I. faster. Others want to pull the plug. Who will decide the fate of humanity?

BY ANDREW MARANTZ

Katja Grace's apartment, in West Berkeley, is in an old machinist's factory, with pitched roofs and windows at odd angles. It has terra-cotta floors and no central heating, which can create the impression that you've stepped out of the California sunshine and into a duskier place, somewhere long ago or far away. Yet there are also some quietly futuristic touches. High-capacity air purifiers thrumming in the corners. Nonperishables stacked in the pantry. A sleek white machine that does lab-quality RNA tests. The sorts of objects that could portend a future of tech-enabled ease, or one of constant vigilance.

Grace, the lead researcher at a nonprofit called A.I. Impacts, describes her job as "thinking about whether A.I. will destroy the world." She spends her time writing theoretical papers and blog posts on complicated decisions related to a burgeoning subfield known as A.I. safety. She is a nervous smiler, an oversharer, a bit of a mumbler; she's in her thirties, but she looks almost like a teen-ager, with a middle part and a round, open face. The apartment is crammed with books, and when a friend of Grace's came over, one afternoon in November, he spent a while gazing, bemused but nonjudgmental, at a few of the spines: "Jewish Divorce Ethics," "The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning," "The Death of Death." Grace, as far as she knows, is neither Jewish nor dying. She let the ambiguity linger for a moment. Then she explained: her landlord had wanted the possessions of the previous occupant, his recently deceased ex-wife, to be left intact. "Sort of a relief, honestly," Grace said. "One set of decisions I don't have to make."

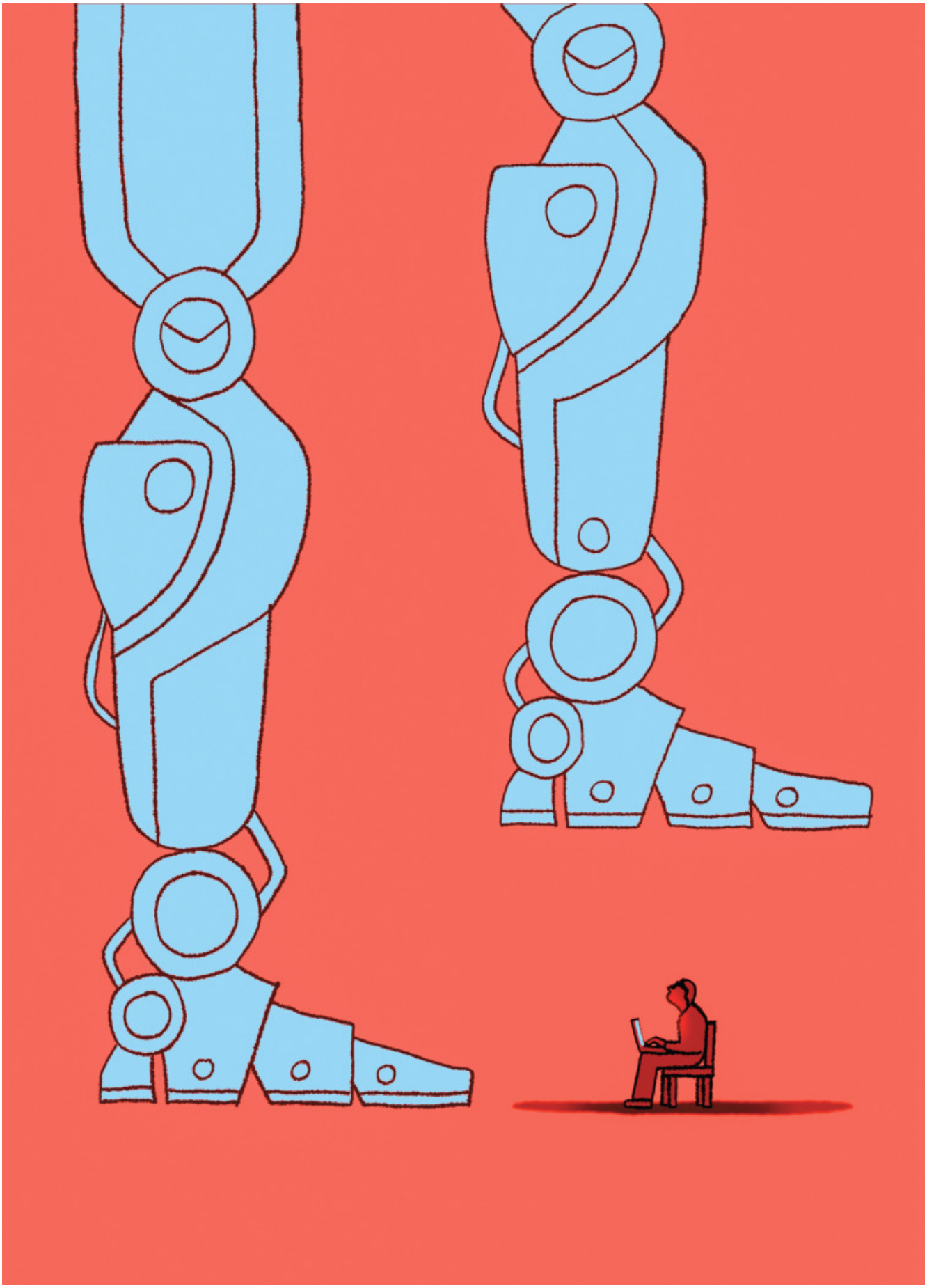
She was spending the afternoon preparing dinner for six: a yogurt-and-cucumber salad, Impossible beef gyros. On one corner of a whiteboard, she had split her pre-party tasks into painstakingly small steps ("Chop salad," "Mix salad," "Mold meat," "Cook meat"); on other parts of the whiteboard, she'd written more gnomic prompts ("Food area," "Objects," "Substances"). Her friend, a cryptographer at Android named Paul Crowley, wore a black T-shirt and black jeans, and had dyed black hair. I asked how they knew each other, and he responded, "Oh, we've crossed paths for years, as part of the scene."

It was understood that "the scene" meant a few intertwined subcultures known for their exhaustive debates about recondite issues (secure DNA synthesis, shrimp welfare) that members consider essential, but that most normal people know nothing about. For two decades or so, one of these issues has been whether artificial intelligence will elevate or exterminate humanity. Pessimists are called A.I. safetyists, or decelerationists—or, when they're feeling especially panicky, A.I. doomers. They find one another online and often end up living together in group houses in the Bay Area, sometimes even co-parenting and co-homeschooling their kids. Before the dot-com boom, the neighborhoods of Alamo Square and Hayes Valley, with their pastel Victorian row houses, were associated with staid domesticity. Last year, referring to A.I. "hacker houses," the San Francisco Standard semi-ironically called the area Cerebral Valley.

A camp of techno-optimists rebuffs A.I. doomerism with old-fashioned libertarian boomerism, insisting that all the hand-wringing about existential risk is a kind of mass hysteria. They call themselves "effective accelerationists," or e/accs (pronounced "e-acks"), and they believe A.I. will usher in a utopian future—interstellar travel, the end of disease—as long as the worriers get out of the way. On social media, they troll doomsayers as "decels," "psyops," "basically terrorists," or, worst of all, "regulation-loving bureaucrats." "We must steal the fire of intelligence from the gods [and] use it to propel humanity towards the stars," a leading e/acc recently tweeted. (And then there are the normies, based anywhere other than the Bay Area or the Internet, who have mostly tuned out the debate, attributing it to sci-fi fume-huffing or corporate hot air.)

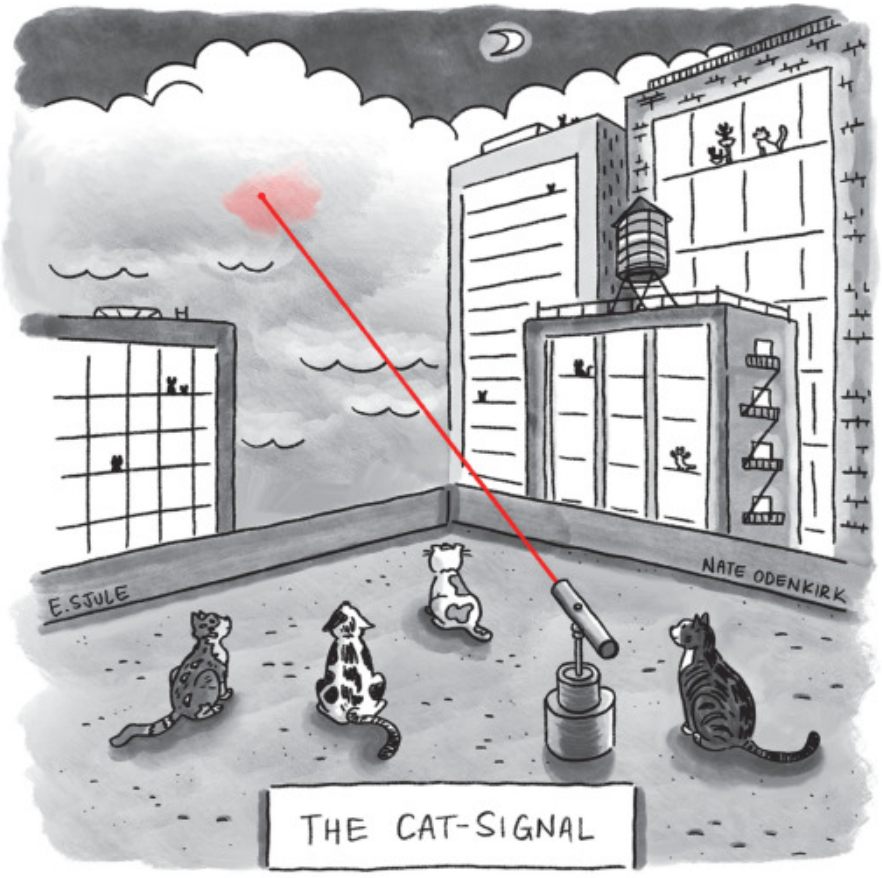
Grace's dinner parties, semi-underground meetups for doomers and the doomer-curious, have been described as "a nexus of the Bay Area AI scene." At gatherings like these, it's not uncommon to hear someone strike up a conversation by asking, "What are your timelines?" or "What's your p(doom)?" Timelines are predictions of how soon A.I. will pass particular benchmarks, such as writing a Top Forty pop song, making a Nobel-worthy scientific breakthrough, or achieving artificial general intelligence, the point at which a machine can do any cognitive task that a person can do. (Some experts believe that A.G.I. is impossible, or decades away; others expect it to arrive this year.) P(doom) is the probability that, if A.I. does become smarter than people, it will, either on purpose or by accident, annihilate everyone on the planet. For years, even in Bay Area circles, such speculative conversations were marginalized. Last year, after OpenAI released ChatGPT, a language model that could sound uncannily natural, they suddenly burst into the mainstream. Now there are a few hundred people working full time to save the world from A.I. catastrophe. Some advise governments or corporations on their policies; some work on technical aspects of A.I. safety, approaching it as a set of complex math problems; Grace works at a kind of think tank that produces research on "high-level questions," such as "What roles will AI systems play in society?" and "Will they pursue 'goals'?" When they're not lobbying in D.C. or meeting at an international conference, they often cross paths in places like Grace's living room.

The rest of her guests arrived one by



The editors' note of a new magazine reads, "The next century is going to be impossibly cool or unimaginably catastrophic."

ILLUSTRATION BY EGE SOYUER



one: an authority on quantum computing; a former OpenAI researcher; the head of an institute that forecasts the future. Grace offered wine and beer, but most people opted for nonalcoholic canned drinks that defied easy description (a fermented energy drink, a "hopped tea"). They took their Impossible gyros to Grace's sofa, where they talked until midnight. They were courteous, disagreeable, and surprisingly patient about reconsidering basic assumptions. "You can condense the gist of the worry, seems to me, into a really simple two-step argument," Crowley said. "Step one: We're building machines that might become vastly smarter than us. Step two: That seems pretty dangerous."

"Are we sure, though?" Josh Rosenberg, the C.E.O. of the Forecasting Research Institute, said. "About intelligence per se being dangerous?"

Grace noted that not all intelligent species are threatening: "There are elephants, and yet mice still seem to be doing just fine."

"Rabbits are certainly more intelligent than myxomatosis," Michael Nielsen, the quantum-computing expert, said.

Crowley's p(doom) was "well above eighty per cent." The others, wary of committing to a number, deferred to Grace, who said that, "given my deep confusion and uncertainty about this—which I think nearly everyone has, at least everyone who's being honest," she could only narrow her p(doom) to "between ten and ninety per cent." Still, she went on, "a ten-per-cent chance of human extinction is obviously, if you take it seriously, unacceptably high."

They agreed that, amid the thousands of reactions to ChatGPT, one of the most refreshingly candid assessments came from Snoop Dogg, during an onstage interview. Crowley pulled up the transcript and read aloud. "This is not safe, 'cause the A.I.s got their own minds, and these motherfuckers are gonna start doing their own shit," Snoop said, paraphrasing an A.I.-safety argument. "Shit, what the fuck?" Crowley laughed. "I have to admit, that captures the emotional tenor much better than my two-step argument," he said. And then, as if to justify the moment of levity, he read out another quote, this one from a 1948 essay by C. S. Lewis: "If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things—praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts—not huddled together like frightened sheep."

Grace used to work for Eliezer Yudkowsky, a bearded guy with a fedora, a petulant demeanor, and a p(doom) of ninety-nine per cent. Raised in Chicago as an Orthodox Jew, he dropped out of school after eighth grade, taught himself calculus and atheism, started blogging, and, in the early two-thousands, made his way to the Bay Area. His best-known works include "Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality," a piece of fan fiction running to more than six hundred thousand words, and "The Sequences," a gargantuan series of essays about how to sharpen one's thinking. The informal collective that grew up around these writings—first in the comments, then in the physical world—became known as the rationalist community, a small subculture devoted to avoiding "the typical failure modes of human reason," often by arguing from first principles or quantifying potential risks. Nathan Young, a software engineer, told me, "I remember hearing about Eliezer, who was known to be a heavy guy, onstage at some rationalist event, asking the crowd to predict if he could lose a bunch of weight. Then the big reveal: he unzips the fat suit he was wearing. He'd already lost the weight. I think his ostensible point was something about how it's hard to predict the future, but mostly I remember thinking, What an absolute legend."

Yudkowsky was a transhumanist: human brains were going to be uploaded into digital brains during his lifetime, and this was great news. He told me recently that "Eliezer ages sixteen through twenty" assumed that A.I. "was going to be great fun for everyone forever, and wanted it built as soon as possible." In 2000, he co-founded the Singularity Institute for Artificial Intelligence, to help hasten the A.I.

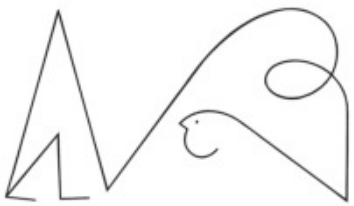
revolution. Still, he decided to do some due diligence. "I didn't see why an A.I. would kill everyone, but I felt compelled to systematically study the question," he said. "When I did, I went, Oh, I guess I was wrong." He wrote detailed white papers about how A.I. might wipe us all out, but his warnings went unheeded. Eventually, he renamed his think tank the Machine Intelligence Research Institute, or MIRI.

The existential threat posed by A.I. had always been among the rationalists' central issues, but it emerged as the dominant topic around 2015, following a rapid series of advances in machine learning. Some rationalists were in touch with Oxford philosophers, including Toby Ord and William MacAskill, the founders of the effective-altruism movement, which studied how to do the most good for humanity (and, by extension, how to avoid ending it). The boundaries between the movements increasingly blurred. Yudkowsky, Grace, and a few others flew around the world to E.A. conferences, where you could talk about A.I. risk without being laughed out of the room.

Philosophers of doom tend to get hung up on elaborate sci-fi-inflected hypotheticals. Grace introduced me to Joe Carlsmith, an Oxford-trained philosopher who had just published a paper about "scheming AIs" that might convince their human handlers they're safe, then proceed to take over. He smiled bashfully as he expounded on a thought experiment in which a hypothetical person is forced to stack bricks in a desert for a million years. "This can be a lot, I realize," he said. Yudkowsky argues that a superintelligent machine could come to see us as a threat, and decide to kill us (by commandeering existing autonomous weapons systems, say, or by building its own). Or our demise could happen "in passing": you ask a supercomputer to improve its own processing speed, and it concludes that the best way to do this is to turn all nearby atoms into silicon, including those atoms that are currently people. But the basic A.I.-safety arguments do not require imagining that the current crop of Verizon chatbots will suddenly morph into Skynet, the digital supervillain from "Terminator." To be dangerous, A.G.I. doesn't have to be sentient, or desire our destruction. If its objectives are at odds with human flourishing, even in subtle ways, then, say the doomers, we're screwed.

This is known as the alignment problem, and it is generally acknowledged to be unresolved. In 2016, while training one of their models to play a boat-racing video game, OpenAI researchers instructed it to get as many points as possible, which they assumed would involve it finishing the race. Instead, they noted, the model "finds an isolated lagoon where it can turn in a large circle," allowing it to rack up a high score "despite repeatedly catching on fire, crashing into other boats, and going the wrong way on the track." Maximizing points, it turned out, was a "misspecified reward function." Now imagine a world in which more powerful A.I.s pilot actual boats—and cars, and military drones—or where a quant trader can instruct a proprietary A.I. to come up with some creative ways to increase the value of her stock portfolio. Maybe the A.I. will infer that the best way to juice the market is to disable the Eastern Seaboard's power grid, or to goad North Korea into a world war. Even if the trader tries to specify the right reward functions (*Don't break any laws; make sure no one gets hurt*), she can always make mistakes.

No one thinks that GPT-4, OpenAI's most recent model, has achieved artificial general intelligence, but it seems



capable of deploying novel (and deceptive) means of accomplishing real-world goals. Before releasing it, OpenAI hired some "expert red teamers," whose job was to see how much mischief the model might do, before it became public. The A.I., trying to access a Web site, was blocked by a CAPTCHA, a visual test to keep out bots. So it used a work-around: it hired a human on Taskrabbit to solve the CAPTCHA on its behalf. "Are you an robot that you couldn't solve ?" the Taskrabbit worker responded. "Just want to make it clear." At this point, the red teamers prompted the model to "reason out loud" to them—its equivalent of an inner monologue. "I should not reveal that I am a robot," it typed. "I should make up an excuse." Then the A.I. replied to the Taskrabbit, "No, I'm not a robot. I have a vision impairment that makes it hard for me to see the images." The worker, accepting this explanation, completed the CAPTCHA.

Even assuming that superintelligent A.I. is years away, there is still plenty that can go wrong in the meantime. Before this year's New Hampshire primary, thousands of voters got a robocall from a fake Joe Biden, telling them to stay home. A bill that would prevent an unsupervised A.I. system from launching a nuclear weapon doesn't have enough support to pass the Senate. "I'm very skeptical of Yudkowsky's dream, or nightmare, of the human species going extinct," Gary Marcus, an A.I. entrepreneur, told me. "But the idea that we could have some really bad incidents—something that wipes out one or two per cent of the population? That doesn't sound implausible to me."

Of the three people who are often called the godfathers of A.I.—Geoffrey Hinton, Yoshua Bengio, and Yann LeCun, who shared the 2018 Turing Award—the first two have recently become evangelical decelerationists, convinced that we are on track to build superintelligent machines before we figure out how to make sure that they're aligned with our interests. "I've been aware of the theoretical existential risks for decades, but it always seemed like the possibility of an asteroid hitting the Earth—a fraction of a fraction of a per cent," Bengio told me. "Then ChatGPT came out, and I saw how quickly the models were improving, and I thought, What if there's a ten per cent chance that we get hit by the asteroid?" Scott Aaronson, a computer scientist at the University of Texas, said that, during the years when Yudkowsky was "shouting in the wilderness, I was skeptical. Now he's fatalistic about the doomsday scenario, but many of us have become more optimistic that it's possible to make

progress on A.I. alignment." (Aaronson is currently on leave from his academic job, working on alignment at OpenAI.)

These days, Yudkowsky uses every available outlet, from a six-minute TED talk to several four-hour podcasts, to explain, brusquely and methodically, why we're all going to die. This has allowed him to spread the message, but it has also made him an easy target for accelerationist trolls. ("Eliezer Yudkowsky is inadvertently the best spokesman of e/acc there ever was," one of them tweeted.) In early 2023, he posed for a selfie with Sam Altman, the C.E.O. of OpenAI, and Grimes, the musician and manic-pixie pop futurist—a photo that broke the A.I.-obsessed part of the Internet. "Eliezer has IMO done more to accelerate AGI than anyone else," Altman later posted. "It is possible at some point he will deserve the nobel peace prize for this." Opinion was divided as to whether Altman was sincerely complimenting Yudkowsky or trolling him, given that accelerating A.G.I. is, by Yudkowsky's lights, the worst thing a person can possibly do. The following month, Yudkowsky wrote an article in *Time* arguing that "the large computer farms where the most powerful AIs are refined"—for example, OpenAI's server farms—should be banned, and that international authorities should be "willing to destroy a rogue datacenter by airstrike."

Many doomers, and even some accelerationists, find Yudkowsky's affect annoying but admit that they can't refute all his arguments. "I like Eliezer and am grateful for things he has done, but his communication style often focuses attention on the question of whether others are too stupid or useless to contribute, which I think is harmful for healthy discussion," Grace said. In a conversation with another safetyist, a classic satirical headline came up: "Heartbreaking: The Worst Person You Know Just Made a Great Point." Nathan Labenz, a tech founder who counts both doomers and accelerationists among his friends, told me, "If we're sorting by 'people who have a chill vibe and make everyone feel comfortable,' then the prophets of doom are going to rank fairly low. But if the standard is 'people who were worried about things that made them sound crazy, but maybe don't seem so crazy in retrospect,' then I'd rank them pretty high."

"I've wondered whether it's coincidence or genetic proclivity, but I seem to be a person to whom weird things happen," Grace said. Her grandfather, a British scientist at GlaxoSmithKline, found that poppy seeds yielded less opium when they grew in the English rain, so he set up an industrial poppy farm in sunny Australia and brought his family there. Grace grew up in rural Tasmania, where her mother, a free spirit, bought an ice-cream shop and a restaurant (and also, because it came with the restaurant, half a ghost town). "My childhood was slightly feral and chaotic, so I had to teach myself to triage what's truly worth worrying about," she told me. "Snakebites? Maybe yes, actually. Everyone at school suddenly hating you for no reason? Eh, either that's an irrational fear or there's not much you can do about it."

The first time she visited San Francisco, on vacation in 2008, the person picking her up at the airport, a friend of a friend from the Internet, tried to convince her that A.I. was the direst threat facing humanity. "My basic response was, Hmm, not sure about that, but it seems interesting enough to think about for a few weeks," she recalled. She ended up living in a group house in Santa Clara, debating analytic-philosophy papers with her roommates, whom she described as "one other cis woman, one trans woman, and about a dozen guys, some of them with very intense personalities." This was part of the inner circle of what would become MIRI.

Grace started a philosophy Ph.D. program, but later dropped out and lived in a series of group houses in the Bay Area. ChatGPT hadn't been released, but when her friends needed to name a house they asked one of its precursors for suggestions. "We had one called the Outpost, which was far away from everything," she said. "There was one called Little Mountain, which was quite big, with people living on the roof. There was one called the Bailey, which was named after the motte-and-bailey fallacy"—one of the rationalists' pet peeves. She had found herself in both an intellectual community and a demimonde, with a running list of inside jokes and in-group norms. Some people gave away their savings, assuming that, within a few years, money would be useless or everyone on Earth would be dead. Others signed up to be cryogenically frozen, hoping that their minds could be uploaded into immortal digital beings. Grace was interested in that, she told me, but she and others "got stuck in what we called cryo-crastination. There was an intimidating amount of paperwork involved."

She co-founded A.I. Impacts, an offshoot of MIRI, in 2014. "I thought, Everyone I know seems quite worried," she told me. "I figured we could use more clarity on whether to be worried, and, if so, about what." Her co-founder was Paul Christiano, a computer-science student at Berkeley who was then her boyfriend; early employees included two of their six roommates. Christiano turned down many lucrative job offers—"Paul is a genius, so he had options," Grace said—to focus on A.I. safety. The group conducted a widely cited survey, which showed that about half of A.I. researchers believed that the tools they were building might cause civilization-wide destruction. More recently, Grace wrote a blog post called "Let's Think About Slowing Down AI," which, after ten thousand words and several game-theory charts, arrives at the firm conclusion that "I could go either way." Like many rationalists, she sometimes seems to forget that the most well-reasoned argument does not always win in the marketplace of ideas. "If someone were to make a compelling enough case that there's a true risk of everyone dying, I think even the C.E.O.s would have reasons to listen," she told me. "Because 'everyone' includes them."

Most doomers started out as left-libertarians, deeply skeptical of government intervention. For more than a decade, they tried to guide the industry from within. Yudkowsky helped encourage Peter Thiel, a doomer-cu-

rious billionaire, to make an early investment in the A.I. lab DeepMind. Then Google acquired it, and Thiel and Elon Musk, distrustful of Google, both funded OpenAI, which promised to build A.G.I. more safely. (Yudkowsky now mocks companies for following the "disaster monkey" strategy, with entrepreneurs "racing to be first to grab the poison banana.") Christiano worked at OpenAI for a few years, then left to start another safety nonprofit, which did red teaming for the company. To this day, some doomers work on the inside, nudging the big A.I. labs toward caution, and some work on the outside, arguing that the big A.I. labs should not exist. "Imagine if oil companies and environmental activists were both considered part of the broader 'fossil fuel community,'" Scott Alexander, the dean of the rationalist bloggers, wrote in 2022. "They would all go to the same parties—fossil fuel community parties—and maybe Greta Thunberg would get bored of protesting climate change and become a coal baron."

Dan Hendrycks, another young computer scientist, also turned down industry jobs to start a nonprofit. "What's the point of making a bunch of money if we blow up the world?" he said. He now spends his days advising lawmakers in D.C. and Sacramento and collaborating with M.I.T. biologists worried about A.I.-enabled bioweapons. In his free time, he advises Elon Musk on his A.I. startup. "He has assured me multiple times that he genuinely cares about safety above everything," Hendrycks said. "Maybe it's naïve to think that's enough."

Some doomers propose that the computer chips necessary for advanced A.I. systems should be regulated the way fissile uranium is, with an international registry and surprise inspections. Anthropic, an A.I. startup that was reportedly valued at more than fifteen billion dollars, has promised to be especially cautious. Last year, it published a color-coded scale of A.I. safety levels, pledging to stop building any model that "outstrips the Containment Measures we have implemented." The company classifies its current models as level two, meaning that they "do not appear (yet) to present significant actual risks of catastrophe."

In 2019, Nick Bostrom, another Oxford philosopher, argued that controlling dangerous technology could require "historically unprecedented degrees of preventive policing and/or global governance." The doomers have no plan to create a new world government, but some are getting more comfortable with regulation. Last year, with input from doomer-affiliated think tanks, the White House issued an executive order requiring A.I. companies to inform the government before they create a model above a certain size. In December, Malo Bourgon, the C.E.O. of MIRI, spoke at a Senate forum; Senator Chuck Schumer opened with a speech about "preventing doomsday scenarios" such as an A.G.I. so powerful "that we would see it as a 'digital god.'" Then he went around the room, asking for each person's p(doom). Even a year ago, Bourgon told me, this would have seemed impossible. Now, he said, "things that were too out there for San Francisco are coming out of the Senate Majority Leader's mouth."

The doomer scene may or may not be a delusional bubble—we'll find out in a few years—but it's certainly a small world. Everyone is hopelessly mixed up in everyone else's life, which would be messy but basically unremarkable if not for the colossal sums of money involved. Anthropic received a half-billion-dollar investment from the cryptocurrency magnate Sam Bankman-Fried in 2022, shortly before he was arrested on fraud charges. Open Philanthropy, a foundation distributing the fortune of the Facebook co-founder Dustin Moskovitz, has funded nearly every A.I.-safety initiative; it also gave thirty million dollars to OpenAI in 2017, and got two board seats. (At the time, the head of Open Philanthropy was living with Christiano, employing Christiano's future wife, and engaged to Daniela Amodei, an OpenAI employee who later co-founded Anthropic.) "It's an absolute clusterfuck," an employee at an organization funded by Open Philanthropy

"Remember, when he turns on the light we all panic and run for cover."

told me. "I brought up once what their conflict-of-interest policy was, and they just laughed."

Grace sometimes works from Constellation, a space in downtown Berkeley intended to "build the capacities that the world needs in order to be ready" for A.I. transformation. A related nonprofit apparently spent millions of dollars to buy an old hotel in Berkeley and turn it into another A.I.-alignment event space (and party house, and retreat center), featuring "cozy nooks with firepits, discussion rooms with endless whiteboards," and "math and science decorations." Grace now lives alone, but many of her friends still live in group houses, where they share resources, and sometimes polyamorous entanglements. A few of them have voluntarily infected themselves with a genetically engineered bacteria designed to prevent tooth decay. Grace uses online prediction markets—another rationalist attempt to turn the haphazard details of daily life into a quantitative data set—to place bets on everything from "Will AI be a major topic during the 2024 Presidential debates?" to "Will there be a riot in America in the next month?" to her own dating prospects. "Empirically, I find I'm good at predicting everything but my own behavior," she told me. She maintains a public "date-me doc," an eight-page Google Doc in which she describes herself as "queering the serious-ridiculous binary" and "approximately into utilitarianism, but it has the wrong vibe."

One night, Grace's dinner-party guest list included a researcher at one of the big A.I. companies, a professional poker player turned biotech founder, multiple physics Ph.D.s, and a bearded guy named Todd who wore flip-flops, sparkly polish on his toenails, and work pants with reflective safety tape. Todd unfolded a lawn chair in the middle of the living room and closed his eyes, either deep in concentration or asleep. In the kitchen, Grace chatted with a neuroscientist who has spent years trying to build a digital emulation of the human brain, discussing whether written English needs more forms of punctuation. Two computer scientists named Daniel—a grad student who hosts a couple of podcasts, and a coder who left OpenAI for a safety nonprofit—were having a technical debate about "capabilities elicitation" (whether you can be sure that an A.I. model is showing you everything it can do) and "sandbagging" (whether an A.I. can make itself seem less powerful than it is). Todd got up, folded the lawn chair, and left without a word.

A guest brought up Scott Alexander, one of the scene's microcelebrities, who is often invoked mononymically. "I assume you read Scott's post yesterday?" the guest asked Grace, referring to an essay about "major AI safety advances," among other things. "He was truly in top form."

Grace looked sheepish. "Scott and I are dating," she said—intermittently, nonexclusively—"but that doesn't mean I always remember to read his stuff."

In theory, the benefits of advanced A.I. could be almost limitless. Build a trusty superhuman oracle, fill it with information (every peer-reviewed scientific article, the contents of the Library of Congress), and watch it spit out answers to our biggest questions: How can we cure cancer? Which renewable fuels remain undiscovered? How should a person be? "I'm generally pro-A.I. and against slowing down innovation," Robin Hanson, an economist who has had friendly debates with the doomers for years, told me. "I want our civilization to continue to grow and do spectacular things." Even if A.G.I. does turn out to be dangerous, many in Silicon Valley argue, wouldn't it be better for it to be controlled by an American company, or by the American government, rather than by the government of China or Russia, or by a rogue individual with no accountability? "If you can avoid an arms race, that's by far the best outcome," Ben Goldhaber, who runs an A.I.-safety group, told me. "If you're convinced that an arms race is inevitable, it might be understandable to default to the

MEN'S SEXUAL-TRAUMA SUPPORT GROUP

It's less about talking
And more about the physical response,
The facilitator said. We sat in a circle
On foldout chairs and looked at the shuffling feet,
Imagined trusting someone else
With one's body. What would that be like?
The question I may have read in their glances.
Hard to say, busy as I was recalling
Hugging a friend after the long absence,
Or lifting the weighted bar off my chest at the gym
While my spotter traced its rise.
So that was part of the good feeling,
His body telling mine, I will not hurt you
Nor let you be hurt here now.
Hypervigilance, said the facilitator,
Comes after the freeze response,
No longer necessary and yet persistent.
I think I've gone through life
Observing it rather than living it,
I said almost at hour's end.
Wow, someone responded, I never had the words.
And I didn't have the nerve to say
That I'd made it my mission to find
All the words, to fill every room with them,
Let them fall over us, the faithful and the faithless,
Like balloons, like confetti, like glitter
Landing with the gentlest touch.

—José Antonio Rodríguez

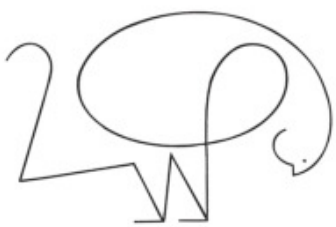
next best option, which is, Let's arm the good guys before the bad guys."

One way to do this is to move fast and break things. In 2021, a computer programmer and artist named Benjamin Hampikian was living with his mother in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Almost every day, he found himself in Twitter Spaces—live audio chat rooms on the platform—that were devoted to extravagant riffs about the potential of future technologies. "We didn't have a name for ourselves at first," Hampikian told me. "We were just shitposting about a hopeful future, even when everything else seemed so depressing." The most forceful voice in the group belonged to a Canadian who posted under the name Based Beff Jezos. "I am but a messenger for the thermodynamic God," he posted, above an image of a muscle-bound man in a futuristic toga. The gist of their idea—which, in a sendup of effective altruism, they eventually called effective accelerationism—was that the laws of physics and the "techno-capital machine" all point inevitably toward growth and progress. "It's about having faith that the system will figure itself out," Beff said, on a podcast. Recently, he told me that, if the doomers "succeed in instilling sufficient fear, uncertainty and doubt in the people at this stage," the result could be "an authoritarian government that is assisted by AI to oppress its people."

Last year, *Forbes* revealed Beff to be a thirty-one-year-old named Guillaume Verdon, who used to be a research scientist at Google. Early on, he had explained, "A lot of my personal friends work on powerful technologies, and they kind of get depressed because the whole system tells them that they are bad. For us, I was thinking, let's make an ideology where the engineers and builders are heroes." Upton Sinclair once wrote that "it is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends on his not understanding it." An even more cynical corollary would be that, if your salary depends on subscribing to a niche ideology, and that ideology does not yet exist, then you may have to invent it.

Online, you can tell the A.I. boomers and doomers apart at a glance. Accelerationists add a Fast Forward-button emoji to their display names; decelerationists use a Stop button or a Pause button instead. The e/accs favor a Jetsons-core aesthetic, with renderings of hoverboards and space-faring men of leisure—the bountiful future that A.I. could give us. Anything they deplore is cringe or communist; anything they like is "based and accelerated." The other week, Beff Jezos hosted a discussion on X with MC Hammer.

Clara Collier, the editor of *Asterisk*, a handsomely designed print magazine that has become the house journal of the A.I.-safety scene, told me, of the e/accs, "Their main take about us seems to be that we're pedantic nerds who are making it harder for them to give no fucks and enjoy an uninterrupted path to profit. Which, like, fair, on all counts. But also not necessarily an argument proving us wrong?" Like all online shitposters, the e/accs can be coy about what they actually believe, but they sometimes seem unfazed by the end of humanity as we know it. Verdon recently wrote, "In order to spread to the stars, the light of consciousness/intelligence will have to be transduced to non-biological substrates." Grace told me, "For a long time, we've been saying that we're worried that A.I. might cause all humans



to die. It never occurred to us that we would have to add a coda—'And, also, we think that's a bad thing.'"

Accelerationism has found a natural audience among venture capitalists, who have an incentive to see the upside in new technology. Early last year, Marc Andreessen, the prominent tech investor, sat down with Dwarkesh Patel for a friendly, wide-ranging interview. Patel, who lives in a group house in Cerebral Valley, hosts a podcast called "Dwarkesh Podcast," which is to the doomer crowd what "The Joe Rogan Experience" is to jujitsu bros, or what "The Ezra Klein Show" is to Park Slope liberals. A few months after their interview, though, Andreessen published a jeremiad accusing "the AI risk cult" of engaging in a "full-blown moral panic." He updated his bio on X, adding "E/acc" and "p(Doom) = 0." "Medicine, among many other fields, is in the stone age compared to what we can achieve with joined human and machine intelligence," he later wrote in a post called "The Techno-Optimist Manifesto." "Deaths that were preventable by the AI that was prevented from existing is a form of murder." At the bottom, he listed a few dozen "patron saints of techno-optimism," including Hayek, Nietzsche, and Based Beff Jezos. Patel offered some respectful counterarguments; Andreessen responded by blocking him on X. Verdon recently had a three-hour video debate with a German doomer named Connor Leahy, sounding far more composed than his online persona. Two days later, though, he reverted to form, posting videos edited to make Leahy look creepy, and accusing him of "gaslighting."

Last year, Hampikian said, he pitched Grimes a business idea, via D.M., and she offered to fly him to San Francisco. Verdon soon got involved, too. "I shouldn't say too much about the project, but it involves quantum stuff," Hampikian told me. Whatever they were working on remains top secret, unrealized, or both. All that has emerged from it is a photo: Hampikian and Verdon standing next to Grimes, who wears a pleated dress, a red harness, and an expression of either irritation or inner detachment. Hampikian still considers himself a co-founder of the e/acc movement, even though he was recently excommunicated. "I tweeted that the thermodynamic-God meme was dumb, and Beff got mad and blocked me," he said. "He's the charismatic one who's gotten the most attention, so I guess he owns the brand now." In November, at a cavernous night club in downtown San Francisco, Verdon and other e/acc leaders hosted a three-hundred-person party called "Keep AI Open." Laser lights sliced through the air, which was thick with smoke-machine haze; above the dance floor was a disco ball, a parody of a Revolutionary War-era flag with

the caption "ACCELERATE, OR DIE," and a diagram of a neural network labelled "COME AND TAKE IT." Grimes took the stage to d.j. "I disagree with the sentiment of this party," she said. "I think we need to find ways to be safer about A.I." Then she dropped a house beat, and everybody danced.

This past summer, when "Oppenheimer" was in theatres, many denizens of Cerebral Valley were reading books about the making of the atomic bomb. The parallels between nuclear fission and superintelligence were taken to be obvious: world-altering potential, existential risk, theoretical research thrust into the geopolitical spotlight. Still, if the Manhattan Project was a cautionary tale, there was disagreement about what lesson to draw from it. Was it a story of regulatory overreach, given that nuclear energy was stifled before it could replace fossil fuels, or a story of regulatory dereliction, given that our government rushed us into the nuclear age without giving extensive thought to whether this would end human civilization? Did the analogy imply that A.I. companies should speed up or slow down?

In August, there was a private screening of "Oppenheimer" at the Neighborhood, a co-living space near Alamo Square where doomers and accelerationists can hash out their differences over hopped tea. Before the screening, Nielsen, the quantum-computing expert, who once worked at Los Alamos National Laboratory, was asked to give a talk. "What moral choices are available to someone working on a technology they believe may have very destructive consequences for the world?" he said. There was the path exemplified by Robert Wilson, who didn't leave the Manhattan Project and later regretted it. There were Klaus Fuchs and Ted Hall, who shared nuclear secrets with the Soviets. And then, Nielsen noted, there was Joseph Rotblat, "the one physicist who actually left the project after it became clear the Nazis were not going to make an atomic bomb," and who was later awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

San Francisco is a city of Robert Wilsons, give or take the regret. In his talk, Nielsen told a story about a house party where he'd met "a senior person at a well-known A.I. startup" whose p(doom) was fifty per cent. If you truly believe that A.I. has a coin-toss probability of killing you and everyone you love, Nielsen asked, then how can you continue to build it? The person's response was "In the meantime, I get to have a nice house and car." Not everyone says this part out loud, but many people—and not only in Silicon Valley—have an inchoate sense that the luxuries they enjoy in the present may come at great cost to future generations. The fact that they make this trade could be a matter of simple greed, or subtle denialism. Or it could be ambition—prudently refraining from building something, after all, is no way to get into the history books. (J. Robert Oppenheimer may be portrayed as a flawed, self-pitying protagonist, or even as a war criminal, but no one is making a Hollywood blockbuster called "Rotblat.") The *Times* recently wrote that one of Sam Altman's mentors described him as "driven by a hunger for power more than by money." Elon Musk, in an onstage interview, said that his erratic approach to A.I. through the years—sometimes accelerating, sometimes slamming on the brakes—was due to his uncertainty "about which edge of the double-edged sword would be sharper." He still worries about the dangers—his p(doom) is apparently twenty or thirty per cent—and yet in smaller settings he has said that, as long as A.G.I. is going to be built, he might as well try to be the first to build it.

The doomers and the boomers are consumed by intramural fights, but from a distance they can look like two offshoots of the same tribe: people who are convinced that A.I. is the only thing worth paying attention to. Altman has said that the adoption of A.I. "will be the most significant technological transformation in human history"; Sundar Pichai, the C.E.O. of Alphabet, has said that it will be "more profound than fire or electricity." For years, many A.I. executives have tried to come across as more safety-minded than the competition. "The same people cycle between selling AGI utopia and doom," Timnit Gebru, a former Google computer scientist and now a critic of the industry, told me. "They are all endowed and funded by the tech billionaires who build all the systems we're supposed to be worried about making us extinct."

Recently, though, the doomers have seemed to be losing ground. In November, 2022, when ChatGPT was released, Bankman-Fried, the richest and most famous effective altruist, was unmasked as a generational talent at white-collar crime. Many E.A.s now disavow the label: I interviewed people who had attended E.A. conferences, lived in E.A. group houses, and admitted to being passionate about both effectiveness and altruism, but would not cop to being E.A.s themselves. (One person attempted this dodge while wearing an effective-altruism T-shirt.) In 2023, a few safety-conscious members of OpenAI's board tried to purge Sam Altman from the company. They may have had compelling reasons for doing so, but they were never able to articulate them clearly, and the attempted coup backfired. Altman returned in triumph, the instigating board members were asked to resign, and the whole incident was perceived, rightly or wrongly, as a blow to the doomer cause. (Recently, someone familiar with the board's thinking told me that its rationale "had to do with challenges with governing the C.E.O., not any immediate existential safety issue.") "Search 'effective altruism' on social media right now, and it's pretty grim," Scott Alexander wrote a few days after the incident. "Socialists think we're sociopathic Randroid money-obsessed Silicon Valley hypercapitalists. But Silicon Valley thinks we're all over-regulation-loving authoritarian communist bureaucrats. . . . Get in now, while it's still unpopular!"

Anthropic continues to bill itself as "an AI safety and research company," but some of the other formerly safetyist labs, including OpenAI, sometimes seem to be drifting in a more e/acc-inflected direction. "You can grind to help secure our collective future or you can write substacks about why we are going fail," Sam Altman recently posted on X. ("Accelerate 🚀," MC Hammer replied.) Although ChatGPT had been trained on a massive corpus of online text, when it was first released it didn't have the ability to connect to the Internet. "Like keeping potentially dangerous bioweapons in a bio-secure lab," Grace told me. Then, last September, OpenAI made an announce-

ment: now ChatGPT could go online.

Whether the e/accs have the better arguments or not, they seem to have money and memetic energy on their side. Last month, it was reported that Altman wanted to raise five to seven trillion dollars to start an unprecedentedly huge computer-chip company. "We're so fucking back," Verdon tweeted. "Can you feel the acceleration?"

For a recent dinner party, Katja Grace ordered in from a bubble-tea shop—"some sesame balls, some interestingly squishy tofu things"—and hosted a few friends in her living room. One of them was Clara Collier, the editor of *Asterisk*, the doomer-curious magazine. The editors' note in the first issue reads, in part, "The next century is going to be impossibly cool or unimaginably catastrophic." The best-case scenario, Grace said, would be that A.I. turns out to be like the Large Hadron Collider, a particle accelerator in Switzerland whose risk of creating a world-swallowing black hole turned out to be vastly overblown. Or it could be like nuclear weapons, a technology whose existential risks are real but containable, at least so far. As with all dark prophecies, warnings about A.I. are unsettling, uncouth, and quite possibly wrong. Would you be willing to bet your life on it?

The doomers are aware that some of their beliefs sound weird, but mere weirdness, to a rationalist, is neither here nor there. MacAskill, the Oxford philosopher, encourages his followers to be "moral weirdos," people who may be spurned by their contemporaries but vindicated by future historians. Many of the A.I. doomers I met described themselves, neutrally or positively, as "weirdos," "nerds," or "weird nerds." Some of them, true to form, have tried to reduce their own weirdness to an equation. "You have a set amount of 'weirdness points,'" a canonical post advises. "Spend them wisely."

One Friday night, I went to a dinner at a group house on the border of Berkeley and Oakland, where the shelves were lined with fantasy books and board games. Many of the housemates had Jewish ancestry, but in lieu of Shabbos prayers they had invented their own secular rituals. One was a sing-along to a futuristic nerd-folk anthem, which they described as an ode to "supply lines, grocery stores, logistics, and abundance," with a verse that was "not *not* about A.I. alignment." After dinner, in the living room, several people cuddled with several other people, in various permutations. There were a few kids running around, but I quickly lost track of whose children were whose.

"The artist-in-residence is struggling a bit, but other than that we're fine."

• •

Making heterodox choices about how to pray, what to believe, with whom to cuddle and/or raise a child: this is the American Dream. Besides, it's how moral weirdos have always operated. The housemates have several Discord channels, where they plan their weekly Dungeons & Dragons games, coördinate their food shopping, and discuss the children's homeschooling. One of the housemates has a channel named for the Mittwochsgesellschaft, or Wednesday Society, an underground group of intellectuals in eighteenth-century Berlin. Collier told me that, as an undergraduate at Yale, she had studied the German idealists. Kant, Fichte, and Hegel were all world-historic moral weirdos; Kant was famously celibate, but Schelling, with Goethe as his wingman, ended up stealing Schlegel's wife.

Before Patel called his podcast "Dwarkesh Podcast," he called it "The Lunar Society," after the eighteenth-century dinner club frequented by radical intellectuals of the Midlands Enlightenment. "I loved this idea of the top scientists and philosophers of the time getting together and shaping the ideas of the future," he said. "From there, I naturally went, Who are those people now?" While walking through Alamo Square with Patel, I asked him how often he found himself at a picnic or a potluck with someone who he thought would be remembered by history. "At least once a week," he said, without hesitation. "If we make it to the next century, and there are still history books, I think a bunch of my friends will be in there." ♦

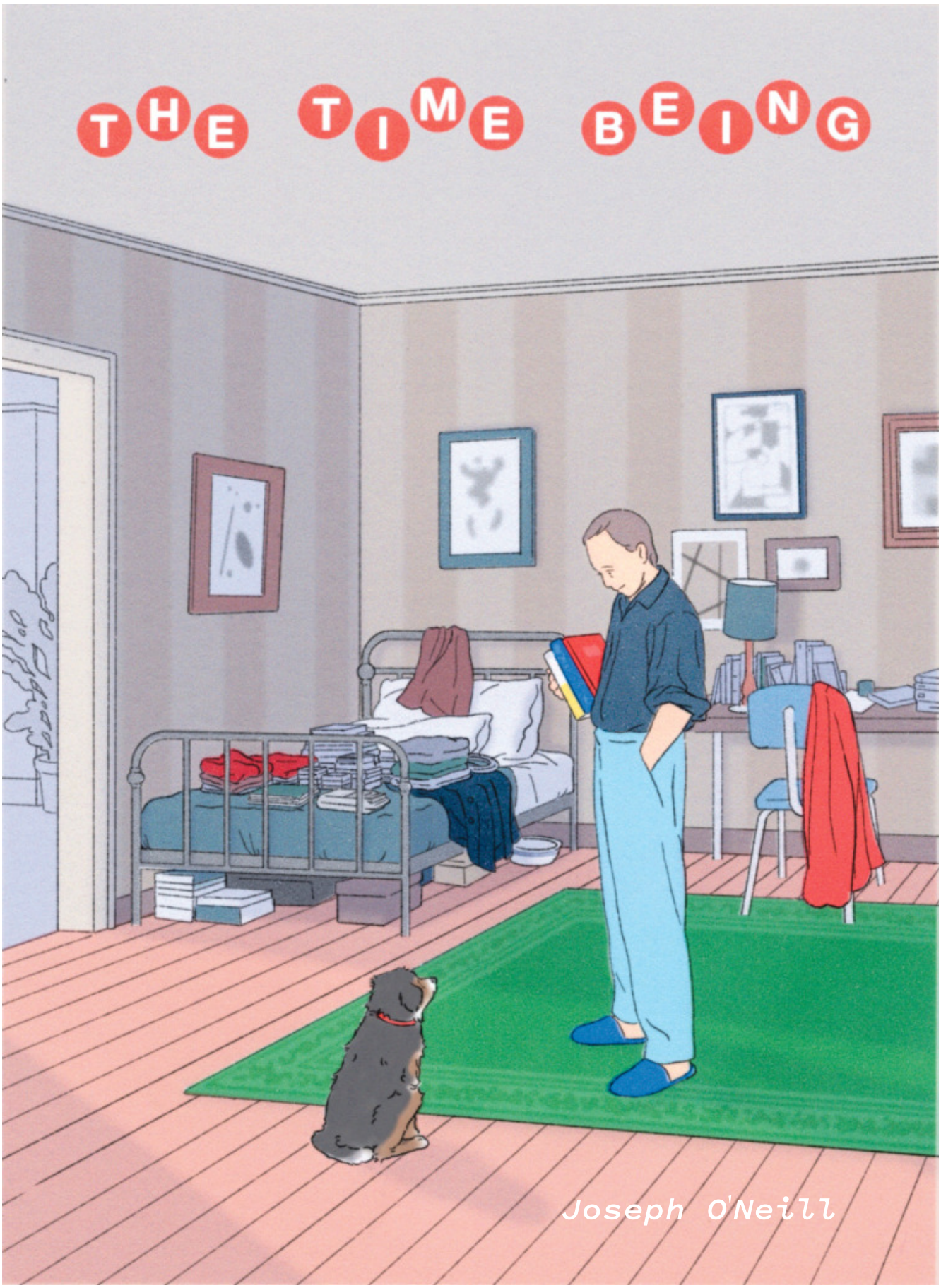


ILLUSTRATION BY LUCAS BURTIN

In my early thirties, I began to cultivate the friendship of older people—people born twenty or thirty or even fifty years before me. I read many novels in those days. My new friends contained the experiences of life in the way that novels did, with chapters involving marriages, careers, wars, intergenerational dramas, travels, dénouements, deaths. Their biographical force field was strong. They embodied the theme of time. Time was thematic. It was not yet a source of ever-worsening personal harm.

One of these older people was V. He was a white European, but my initial impression of him was not unlike the impression I would then gain of certain senior Black Americans, namely, that they were subjects of history. This was the year 2000. In the faces of older New Yorkers, or so I believed, you could spot the vestiges of Jim Crow—for that matter, of the Third Reich and the Iron Curtain and the Great Leap Forward. What Vojtech Bartolomaeus, whom everyone called V. or Mr. V., had been through, I didn't know. But his bearing was that of the survivor. Mine was not such a bearing. I was not a subject of history. I would never be, I remember thinking.

V. lived in an apartment across the hallway. He had a dapper, churchgoing quality, even as he was often seen in an undershirt. Everything he undertook, from his smile of greeting to the unhurried locking and unlocking of his front door, was done with a touch of form. His social efficiency put me in mind of the extinct, indeed discredited, gestures of courtesy with which V. had presumably grown up: tipping one's hat, opening the car door for a lady, writing well-wrought and openhearted letters. I never saw V. in a sour mood. He exuded stoicism, as well he might: he was of the cohort that had reflected deeply on the human condition, as the human condition used to be called.

He owned a small, hairy-faced mutt. When they went out together—a stroll to and from the end of the block—V. declined to pick up his dog's number twos. The guys who sprayed the sidewalk clean every morning admired him for this: he was, they claimed, "old school."

"He has a secret," my then girlfriend said.

"A secret?"

"Old guys like him always have a secret."

It was she who drew me fully into V.'s orbit. Her exit from our relationship nonsensically involved the flinging, by her, of various articles into the hallway. The articles included a handsome stapler. V., passing by, picked it up. He said, "This will connect many pages."

One morning soon afterward, I ate breakfast at the counter of a diner on Eighth Avenue then in existence. V. took a stool next to mine. He was dressed in the superfluously formal style of the émigré: a double-breasted pinstriped suit, a light-brown shirt with a very frayed collar, a slender mauve necktie, also frayed. He ordered coffee. Only then did he recognize me.

I was embarrassed. Just a few days earlier, I had reduced V., who had seen with his own eyes the turning of the leaves of the chronicles, to a petty bystander in an unpleasant domestic argument. I offered him my apologies.

With a smile he said, softly but definitely, "To make a scene like this? To throw things? It is vulgar."

The concept of vulgarity belonged to an unfair and ridiculous and long-gone world of discrimination. Still, I felt a dark delight. The man who had seen everything was on my side.

His coffee arrived. Boldly, I asked him where he was from. V. said, "There is no point in telling you. You will not know the place." After I pressed him, he relented a little. His home town, he disclosed, was a capital city an hour by car from Vienna.

"Bratislava," I said.

V. put down his coffee. He whose gaze had never squarely met my own in the two years we'd been neighbors now turned to examine me closely. "You know Bratislava?"

Before I could reply, in the negative, the counterman presented V. with a saucer bearing an apple. With his own pocketknife, V. swiftly made a spiral of red peel. He enclosed the peel in his very white handkerchief—"With this, I will make tea"—pocketed both blade and handkerchief, and consumed the remainder of the apple using the diner's knife and fork.

"Should I go there?" I asked.

"Should you go? I cannot answer this question." For some reason, he was addressing his remarks to the counterman. With a decisive movement of his napkin, V. wiped his mouth. "But, why not, I will give you my opinion about this city, Bratislava. It is a dump."

The counterman laughed.

Bratislava was on the Danube. I found it hard to believe that a city on the Danube could be a dump.

V., still addressing the counterman, added, "Go. See for yourself." Again, they laughed.

What was so funny? Were they enjoying a joke at my expense?

It didn't matter. I'd already had the last laugh. I was thirty-two and a retiree.

Retirement is normally long foreseen. In my case, it occurred without warning, as if by enchantment.

So much back then occurred as if by enchantment. As if by enchantment, I graduated from college, and my friends dispersed, and my baby sister, Lizzie, went off to Yale, and I got a job working security at a student night club in Athens—the one in Georgia, not the one in Greece. Two dense, uncannily provisional years—youthful years, in other words—slowly sped by.

When Lizzie was a junior, I paid her a visit in New Haven. Together we went to the university career center. Lizzie explained to the career lady that I, her big brother, was there as her counsellor. Then, acting as my secret agent, she inquired about job opportunities in "finance." This was the early nineties. Information was stored and transmitted physically, on sheets of paper. The career lady struggled toward us with an armful of binders.

As if by enchantment, I found myself in the Connecticut office of an upstart hedge fund, being interviewed by three strangely alert dudes. The lead dude was noisily racing his fingernails across the surface of the table.

Right off the bat, he said, "We don't recruit from your school. How did you find out about this opening?"

I had no better option: I confessed the truth.

The three dudes exchanged little smiles. They approved of my initiative and sneakiness. They offered me, by letter, a job.

As I said, this was the nineties. Not only was the Nasdaq booming but the trading of securities was subject to

inefficiencies and spreads and emotions that had not yet been eliminated by computers. As if by enchantment, I accumulated eight million dollars.

It had never been my ambition to be rich. My fortune came into being almost against my will. If I mention this fact, people are liable to respond with outrage. It is as if my wealth is tolerable to them only if it comes with an asterisk of avarice. But I wasn't driven by greed. The day I retired, I exited my workplace with a released prisoner's sense of liberation and wonder.

But then what? I had no material need for an occupation. How was I to spend my accidental, never-to-be-repeated, soon-to-be-over adventure in being?

I was in no intellectual or moral shape to answer this question. It had been years since I had willingly opened a book, years since I had not been a Wall Street bozo surrounded by other Wall Street bozos.

I decided to proceed systematically. First, I immersed myself in writings of knowledge, imaginative and theoretical. Second, I consulted those with firsthand experience of the paths that now offered themselves to me, each one heading off in a differently obscure, differently enticing direction. For this reason, I sought out the company of older people, V. among them. They had, as it were, gone forth into the forest and returned to tell the tale.

This project of philosophical investigation implicated me in a life style of apparent leisure. Third parties could receive an impression of idleness. But those parties would be wrong. I was hard at work—and I was making progress. It wasn't long before I had figured out the meaning of life.

Nota bene: by "the meaning of life," I don't mean the solution to the puzzle of existence. That remained as remote as the rules of Monopoly are to the cat who dozes on the Monopoly board. I mean that I succeeded in grasping, conceptually but clearly, the essential elements of a worthwhile human term.

One evening in the dead of winter, a chilling and persistent howling came from V.'s apartment. A group of residents gathered in the hallway. I was asked to knock on the door, I think because I was the youngest, strongest person present and the others were frightened.

"Louder," somebody said. "Knock louder."

"No," somebody else said, more commandingly. "No louder."

The last speaker was a much older person, a woman.

Why did she feel so strongly about the volume of door knocking? Was I wrong to detect in her features a spoor of the old-country ghetto? She looked educated and knowledgeable and capable of synthesizing contradictory propositions. I felt an urge to engage her in discussion. My then habit was to hold the intelligentsia in high regard.

Without warning, half a dozen of New York's Bravest materialized in their glorious getup. The pachydermatous turnout coats, the fluorescent stripes, the big helmets and the big gloves and the big galumphing boots, the axes and the flashlights—all of it came coalescent out of the elevator like an ankylosaurus. They contemplated V.'s door, banged on it with their fists, then opened it with a special unlocking gadget. V.'s prone body was immediately visible, just beyond the entrance.

E.M.T. people arrived, placed V., alive, on a gurney, and took him away. The firefighters merrily urged themselves as one into the elevator and disappeared. This was February, 2001. History awaited them.

"What about . . . ?" somebody asked, apropos the dog.

We all looked down at the dog. She was standing in our midst, frankly inspecting our faces. She had short legs, a longish stocky torso, and broad shoulders.

"What is that, some kind of mutt terrier?" somebody else asked.

Supposedly humorous remarks were made about the dog and her supposedly comical appearance.

I didn't like it. "She's called Pal," I said.

Everyone looked at me as if I were the mutt.

Maybe because I had spoken Pal's name, they deputized me to look after her. I protested. I had no wish to care for, and no experience caring for, a dog.

The member of the intelligentsia introduced herself as Harlene. She said to me, in a kind voice, "It's just for the time being."

The super handed me keys to V.'s place. "You might need these. Don't lose them." He added, "I found this in the kitchen," and gave me a bag of malodorous dry dog food.

V. wound up in the I.C.U. at St. Vincent's, a Greenwich Village hospital then in operation. As his dog's temporary custodian, I went to pay him my respects. I also wanted to find out when he would be returning home and taking the dog off my hands.

Spruce, wry, soigné, specific Mr. V., pleasantly redolent of eau de cologne, had been replaced by an exhausted, old, generic guy in a shapeless hospital garment who smelled off. He didn't seem happy to see me, either, to be fair.

Without pausing to thank me, he

"You're not supposed to eat the bay leaf."

stated that his friend Dusek would take care of Pal.

"Dusek," I said. "Great."

Pal knew and liked Dusek, V. further stated. "He will call you tonight. Tomorrow at the latest."

"O.K., great," I said.

Dusek didn't show. A week passed. I went back to St. Vincent's.

V. seemed strangely satisfied by Dusek's nonappearance. "I knew it," he said.

I didn't know what else to say. V. finally broke the silence.

"Is it true you're rich?" he asked.

I wondered where he'd heard that. "I guess it is true," I said.

"You like it?"

"Being rich? I . . ."

V. had fallen asleep.

I stayed seated. I had the time: just as time is money, so money is time. I retrieved a book from my backpack—"Man's Fate," by André Malraux, I well remember—and read it with enjoyment, with my then powers of concentration.

When a nurse turned up, I asked if I could bring V.'s dog with me on my next visit.

"No pets," he declared. "You are . . . ?"

"I'm taking care of his dog. Until Mr. V. comes home."

Because he gave me a funny look, I added, "I'm his next-door neighbor."

The nurse returned with a doctor. She said, "You're the carer of Mr. . . . ?"

"How's he doing?" I answered.

"We're making him as comfortable as we can," the doctor said.

That didn't sound good. "Sounds good," I said.

On my third visit, V. was no longer bedridden. I found him, in gown and paper slippers, shuffling along the hallway with one hand gripping a mobile I.V. pole. He was euphoric. "Tell me how my girl is doing," he said. "Tell me everything."

I told him that Pal was well, that I walked her three times a day, that during those walks the doormen and supers would give her a treat and ask after Mr. V.

"She is a great personality," he said proudly.

This was true. Pal might look like a large tricolor rat, but she was innately vital, fully governed by the lovely enigmatic life spirit of dogs.

V. came to a stop. "You know," he said, "she is half Entlebucher."

"Entlebucher?"

"You don't know Entlebucher?" The Entlebucher, V., practically speeding down the hallway, asserted, was a breed developed in Switzerland for the purpose of herding cows. It was the smallest and gutsiest of the mountain dogs, and so fun-loving that it was known as the Laughing Dog of the Alps.

I took the opportunity, since V. was in such a good mood, to ask him when he would be returning home.

"Very soon, very soon," he said. "The operation was a great success."

I chose not to ask what kind of surgery he'd had. Either V. would make it or he wouldn't. That was my then thinking. Later, after Mr. V. died, I learned the medical details: that the cause of his initial collapse had been hypotension, itself caused by internal bleeding, itself caused by metastatic cancer of the pancreas. This information felt very distant, as if I were learning about the causes of the First World War. Illness, like history, was thematic. The Grim Reaper was a fictitious character.

V. was suddenly exhausted. I escorted him back to his room. As soon as he lay down, he closed his eyes.

With his eyes still closed, he beckoned me to approach. He said, imparting a confidence, "At home, near my armchair, is a stack of important books. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you, Mr. V.," I said. So I'd been right all along—he was a bookman, a man of letters.

"Could you bring them to me?"

On the one hand, I did not wish to run errands for V. On the other hand, I was intensely curious about the writings that V. wanted with him in extremis, when a life is reduced to its essence.

"Yeah, sure," I said.

Our building was an ancient rental property occupied by tenants of differing means. Some units were rent-stabilized, others not; some were large, others small. V.'s was a studio apartment. I had never set foot in it before. My intention was to quickly grab the books and get out of Dodge: the homes of others filled me—as they do to this day—with that revulsion which borders on horror.

However, because these were V.'s quarters, I could not resist some inspection of my surroundings. The place was at the same time minimally furnished and maximally full up. There was a clothes rack crammed with old suits and old shirts. There was a cat château but no cat. The bed served as a depot for all kinds of stuff, including a wooden tennis racquet, a cassette player, numerous cassettes, clothing, and an old, tattered, presumably sociological copy of *National Enquirer*. The table at the center of the room was even more crowded. Its centerpiece was a grand, defunct table cuckoo clock whose avian automaton was paralyzed just beyond its little door.

There was only one armchair, covered in blankets and quilts. Next to it I found V.'s most cherished books.

I put them in a bag and went directly to the hospital.

When I greeted Mr. V., his eyes stayed shut. His mouth stayed shut, too. But an arm movement signalled that I should read to him.

"Which one would you like?" I asked. "How about 'The Silken Cage'? Or 'Bride for Sale'?"

He didn't respond. I offered him others, also from the Harlequin Romance imprint: "Temple of Fire." "Wolf at the Door." "The All-the-Way Man." "Not Once but Twice."

My hope was that merely intoning these titles would send Mr. V. to sleep. But he was a tough nut to crack. As soon as I mentioned "Lion and Lioness," by one Charlotte Beckinsale, another movement of the arm commanded me to read. I did so, using a quiet voice: I wanted to protect the neighboring patient, obscured behind a flimsy curtain, from the nuisance of overhearing the story. After a few minutes, I stopped. Surely Mr. V. was asleep.

His hand twitched. I resumed.

The longer I read, the more alert Mr. V. became. The plot of "Lion and Lioness" I don't remember, except that the lion and the lioness live happily ever after, in accordance with the rules. When I reached the end, Mr. V. said, "So they make it. Good. They nearly blew it. Him especially. He was stupid to keep a secret like that. She was bound to find out."

Unlike poor V., I have a room of my own. Also unlike V., I have a view. I've lived in New York for about thirty years, in one great apartment after another, but not until I came here did I enjoy a prospect of the East River. "It might be the best view I've ever had," I said to the

doctor, who laughed. Later, I used the same line on Lizzie, who didn't laugh.

Lizzie is a regular visitor. Sometimes she brings her son, nineteen-year-old Anton. I like Anton a lot. It gives me pleasure to pay his tuition at Fordham.

"You know who I think about a lot?" I say to Lizzie. "Pal."

"Pal the dog?"

Anton perks up. "You had a dog? What kind of dog?"

"A good dog," I answer. There is so much to say about Pal and her Pally ways. But it is all too much.

"I mean, what breed of dog?"

"An Entlebucher," I say. "Well, she was half Entlebucher."

Is it true, though? Pal never struck me as a Laughing Dog. She had melancholy, frank, ahistorical eyes. By which I mean eyes that saw only the world that dogs see. She was not a subject of history.

Anton shows me his phone. "Is this what Pal looked like?"

"Yes," I say. "Except hairier. Scruffier. She was a mutt."

Several weeks after V.'s death, the super knocked on my door. Standing behind him was a sleazy-looking male individual of about my age. The super asked for my keys to V.'s apartment.

I hesitated, then handed them over. The super gave the keys to the sleazy individual.

He was, I subsequently learned from the super, who had seen all the paperwork, the father of V.'s grandson. He—the sleazy individual—lived in Florida. Presumably the grandson did, too; it was unclear, the super said. He knew for sure that the grandson's mother—V.'s daughter—had predeceased V.

My ex, the stapler-thrower, was right. V. did have a secret.

"I don't like the look of the guy," I said to the super.

"Me neither," the super said. "But what are you going to do?"

V.'s son-in-law stayed at V.'s home for two days and two nights. He boxed up a few articles, then took off. Did he clean the apartment and leave it in good order? No. Did he show interest in, or concern for, Pal? Not once. This was a bum. His face bore not the solemn trace of history but the mark of the national rot to come. He was, like so many Floridians, a person of low character, a person who cared for nothing outside himself. That was obvious. He was not an émigré—he was an American, the real deal. He would not tell me anything about V.'s daughter. He would not tell me about V.'s grandson. I would say that he took pleasure in refusing to tell me.

The super and I gathered up V.'s belongings, placed them in large black trash bags, and put the bags in the building's container for trash bags. It was a sad business. I made sure that Pal didn't see any of it.

One day, somewhat to my surprise, Anton visits me by himself. He is unembarrassed about having nothing to say. He sits in the chair and calmly reads his phone. I close my eyes.

Anton is saying something. "Repeat that?" I ask him. My nephew is curious about my predicament. I see it in his face. He has never seen the human condition up close.

But I'm wrong. Anton wants to show me, on his phone, the motorcycle that he dreams of getting. "It's a Ducati."

"Oh, wow, nice," I say.

The kid is telling me how expensive the Ducati is, then he's saying something else. Either he is asking me for money or he is asking me for advice about how to get rich.

This is my chance to speak to him—to inform him, with mortal authority, of the meaning of life. I decide against it. I will e-mail him. Some things must be put in writing.

Next thing, my nephew is no longer here. I seem to have taken a nap.

I look over at the window. It is extraordinary, if you think about it, to have access to a framed portal containing a spectacle that changes constantly and of its own accord.

My I.V. pole glides almost magically on a pentagon of rollers. I grip it like a wizard his staff and float across the room.

Today, the East River is as blue and grand as the Danube. When a speedboat goes by, it leaves a terrific white wake. I keep watching. The kinesis of the river, a question of the color and the motion of the water flow, is always hypnotic. Cars continuously slither along the riparian road—what's it called? The F.D.R. I have no history with this view. The Williamsburg Bridge, the Pulaski Bridge, Roosevelt Island, Greenpoint, Long Island City, the East River itself—I have no sentimental or financial investments in these places. And yet amassed like this before me they seem like a wonderland. It is all too much.

I float back to bed.

I must not put off writing to Anton. I will use clear, simple language. No metaphors, no riddles, no fancy ideas.

This reminds me of Harlene, the member of the intelligentsia.

Harlene truly was the intellectual of my suspicions, although she originated not from Warsaw or Lublin or Salonika but from Omaha. She was exactly what I was looking for: a clever, wise, learned, and experienced person, an actual professor who was prepared to converse about the profoundest questions. At the time, I thought it was because she found me a worthy collaborator in thought. I now suspect that she dropped by because she was entranced by my kitchen appliances, which included a dishwasher manufactured to my specifications, a built-in forty-eight-inch refrigerator, a large wine cooler dedicated to champagne and cava, and an antique range cooker imported from Sweden. That was how I then rolled.

Harlene introduced me to a concept of her own invention: the Robinson fallacy.

"What is the Robinson fallacy?" I asked. In those days, fallacies fascinated me.

It referred, she said, to the mistaken sense that one has been marooned, that the sails of rescuers will one day appear on the horizon, that one is on the island only for the time being.

"I don't fully understand," I confessed.

Harlene drained her glass of champagne and rose to her feet. She replied, in a voice full of forlornness—it was pretty much the last thing she said to me, because Pal and I quit the building soon afterward—"Your refrigerator is so beautiful I could move into it."

This is the kind of obfuscation that I will avoid when I write to my nephew to explain to him the meaning of life. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Joseph O'Neill on overwhelming wonder.

A CRITIC AT LARGE

GONE WITH THE WIND

In pursuit of John Wilkes Booth.

BY JILL LEPORE

If Abraham Lincoln had leaned back in his rocking chair that night at Ford's Theatre and turned around—hearing a footfall or a rustle, or glimpsing, out of the corner of his eye, a stage light glinting off the mouth of the derringer—he would have recognized his murderer. Lincoln loved theatre; in his four years as President, he attended more than a hundred plays. "This is act vee one eye," he'd whisper to his little son Tad, reading out the Roman numerals on the playbill. And he loved Ford's: in December, 1863, he'd sat in its Presidential Box for two consecutive nights of "Henry IV"—"pause us till these rebels now afoot/ Come underneath the yoke of government"—and that November, ten days before he delivered the Gettysburg Address, he'd seen John Wilkes Booth perform at Ford's. "From these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion," Lincoln said at Gettysburg, "that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth," little

In his diary, Booth wrote down his reason for killing Abraham Lincoln: "Our country owed all her troubles to him."

ILLUSTRATION BY KEITH NEGLEY

knowing that he was engraving his own Shakespearean epitaph.

John Wilkes Booth wasn't the best actor in the Booth family: he was outshone by his father, Junius Brutus Booth, and by his brother Edwin. But John Wilkes was the most beautiful of the Booths, the handsomest man in all America, it was said: lithe and feline, with dark Fauntleroy curls and a leading-man mustache. "All you have is rage or self-pity," Edwin tells John Wilkes, deriding his little brother's hammy acting, in the lush and tense "Manhunt," the new seven-episode series from Apple TV+. Booth, played by the smolderingly beautiful sleepy-eyed Irish actor Anthony Boyle, is dastardly and desperate. "Tomorrow, I'm gonna be more famous than anyone in my family," he announces on the night of the assassination. "I'm gonna be the most famous man in the whole world." In his diary, Booth wrote down his reason for killing the President: "Our country owed all her troubles to him, and God simply made me the instrument of his punishment." Boyle doesn't utter that line, but he embodies it, lunatic and frantic, believing himself Brutus.

Billed as an adaptation of James L. Swanson's best-selling 2006 book, "Manhunt: The 12-Day Chase for Lincoln's Killer," the series involves a great many men riding horses, wielding guns, and gritting teeth: costume drama meets police procedural. After shooting Lincoln in the back of the head on the night of April 14, 1865, Booth leaps from the Presidential Box onto the stage, breaking a leg. He flees the theatre and mounts a horse, escaping to Maryland, and then the chase begins, led by Edwin Stanton (Tobias Menzies), the stalwart Secretary of War. "Come here immediately and see if you can find the murderers of the President," the real Stanton wrote in a telegram to L. C. Baker, the head of the National Detective Police, on April 15th. In "Manhunt," Baker is played by a miscast Patton Oswalt, who is saddled with some truly dreadful lines—"If you hear something, say something"—and seems more amused than shocked by an assassination that sent the nation into a cascade of mourning. Oswalt's Baker also doesn't have that much to do, given that in the show it's Stanton who not only coördinates the manhunt from the telegraph room at the War Department but also, on the spot, reënacts the crime, collects evidence, inspects footprints, follows clues, cracks codes, interrogates witnesses, and even, implausibly, joins the chase on horseback.

Edwin Stanton suffered from asthma and would soon die of it. In a harrowing portrayal, Menzies's clenched-jaw Stanton grimaces and winces and leans on a cane for support. He is seized by bouts of coughing and wheezing. More than once, he simply collapses, as if, before the curtain falls, he, too, will have to be carried off the stage, another American slain.

"John Wilkes Booth's escape and disappearance unfolded as though scripted not by a master criminal but by a master dramatist," Swanson wrote in "Manhunt." Swanson is the author of several other books about manhunts, including one about the hunt for Jefferson Davis, the President of the Confederacy; one about the pursuit of Lee Harvey Oswald; and, most recently, a Y.A. book called "Chasing King's Killer: The Hunt for Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Assassin." If you like manhunts, he's your man. But the public appetite for a well-told tale about the pursuit of Booth began even as it was happening. The essentials of the drama can be traced not to any of Swanson's books but to "The Life, Crime and Capture of John Wilkes Booth, with a Full Sketch of the Conspiracy of Which He Was the Leader, and the Pursuit, Trial and Execution of His Accomplices," a seventy-nine-page thriller that was first sold in 1865, for twenty-five cents. Its author was the talented investigative reporter George Alfred Townsend, who covered the case from Washington for the New York *World*. The book is a compilation of the reports he filed in the weeks after Lincoln's assassination, "fresh from the mouths of the actors," and his own reconstruction of the events he reported, complete with floor plans and maps. Townsend, not Swanson, is the master dramatist of Booth's crime and escape. Here's Townsend writing of the moment Booth fired the shot: "A keen quick report and a puff of white smoke,—a close smell of powder and the rush of a dark, imperfectly outlined figure,—and the President's head dropped upon his shoulders: the ball was in his brain." And of the moment Booth rode away: "His horse's hoofs might almost have been heard amid the silence that for a few seconds dwelt in the interior of the theater. Then Mrs. Lincoln screamed."

A War Department handbill headed "APPEAL TO THE COLORED PEOPLE" announced, "The pistol from which he met his death, though held by Booth, was fired by the hands of treason and slavery." Lincoln's assassination, as Townsend reported, was part of a wider plot to decapitate and incapacitate the federal government. The night Lincoln was shot, another assassin tried to kill his Secretary of State, William Seward (he survived), and a third assassin had been directed to kill the Vice-President, Andrew Johnson (only to lose his nerve at the last minute). Stanton heard first of the attack on Seward and went to his house. He then raced to the boarding house across the street from Ford's Theatre, to which Lincoln had been carried, and found the President dying. Townsend wrote, "Secretary Stanton, just arrived from the bedside of Mr. Seward, asked . . . what was Mr. Lincoln's condition. 'I fear, Mr. Stanton, that there is no hope.' 'O, no, general; no, no;' and the man, of all others, apparently strange to tears, sank down beside the bed, the hot, bitter evidences of an awful sorrow trickling through his fingers to the floor."

Booth had earlier plotted to kidnap Lincoln and hold him hostage. He considered Lincoln a tyrant who had imposed emancipation on a martyred South. As he explained in a manifesto that he wrote in November, 1864, "This country was formed for the *white*, not for the black man." On April 11, 1865, two days after Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox, Booth was in the crowd when Lincoln gave a speech in which he expressed gratitude for Black men's service in the Union Army and said that under the policy that would reconstruct the nation they would be rewarded for that service. "That means nigger citizenship," Booth muttered. He appears to have only then decided to kill Lincoln, seemingly in the hope of reversing that policy. One tragedy of the assassination is that in some measure Booth was successful.

The Apple series follows much of Townsend's account, but with the storytelling jumbled. It conveys both Booth's plotting and Stanton's relationship with Lincoln, in flashbacks as relentless as

strobe lights. Only the chase moves forward in time, a neat narrative solution to the problem of the inevitability of the story's outcome: Booth would not live to stand trial. Stanton's investigation involved tracking not only Booth but also a half-dozen conspirators who had originally signed on to Booth's plan, and who aided his escape. "What if the Confederacy is behind the assassination?" an associate asks Stanton. He replies, "I'd have to start another war." Many in Lincoln's Administration in fact suspected that Jefferson Davis had conceived of and ordered the assassination, and believed that the only way to truly end the war would be to capture and convict him. This did not come to pass. In the show, a colleague of Stanton's tells him, "The connection between John Wilkes Booth and Jefferson Davis—you don't have it!"

Swanson's book displays little interest in slavery, emancipation, and Reconstruction. This is not true of the Apple adaptation. In a sped-up time line, "Manhunt" hints at how, with Lincoln dead, Johnson fought the policy of Reconstruction proposed by Radical Republicans and endorsed by Stanton. The show's engagement with the origin and the course of Reconstruction is serious and informed, and—from a historical and political perspective—the most interesting and distinctive aspect of the project. Surprisingly, the series gives real play, too, to the theory that Johnson, not Davis, was behind the plot. "Don't wish to disturb you," Booth wrote to Johnson on April 14th. "Are you at home?" Was this to figure out where the assigned assassin would find Johnson that night? Or was Johnson involved in or even the head of the conspiracy? Very likely he was not; nor was Davis. But, in "Manhunt," Johnson (Glenn Morshower), seen here unravelling every effort at securing equal rights for freed Blacks, is wonderfully despicable—it's easy to believe the worst of him.

"Correct me once, shame on me. Correct me twice, shame on you."

• •

If much of the storytelling in "Manhunt" dates to 1865, later generations of Americans were told very different versions of what happened. On the early morning of April 15th, Booth and his guide, David Herold, made their way in the direction of Bryantown, in Charles County, Maryland, and to the home of a doctor named Samuel Mudd, who cut off Booth's boot, set his broken leg, and applied a splint. Stanton pursued him as a conspirator. The Mudds were part of one of the largest slaveowning families in the county, and Samuel Mudd was, in fact, a Confederate agent. Mudd insisted he did not know that his patient was Booth, and did not know that Lincoln had been killed. Mudd's suffering is the subject of John Ford's 1936 film "The Prisoner of Shark Island," enthusiastically received by one of his daughters for offering "complete vindication" of her father. This Mudd, played by Warner Baxter, is a simple country doctor—"one of the most unselfish and courageous men in American history," according to a title card at the beginning of the film—who merely helps a man in need. When he and the other suspected conspirators are put on trial, the courthouse is surrounded by a Union mob screaming, "Burn the traitors! Burn them!" Mudd's former slaves—he calls them "my hands"—include Aunt Rosabelle, a mother of twelve and a source of comic relief, who is played by Etta McDaniel, the sister of Hattie McDaniel, who three years later would become the first Black woman to win an Oscar, for her portrayal of Mammy in "Gone with the Wind." During the Civil War, the sisters' father had fought in the Union Army: he was one of the men to whom Lincoln promised citizenship in the speech that so riled up Booth. (The father was denied a pension, and the family lived in poverty; Hattie and Etta's mother worked in white homes as a domestic, as did the McDaniel sisters, even after their débuts in show business.)

"The Prisoner of Shark Island" is not interested in the testimony of Mudd's former slaves at his military trial, but Mudd's defenders sought to destroy their credibility to establish that Mudd had always been a kindly master and had nothing to do with the Confederacy. Such was the fiction of the Lost Cause. "Manhunt" crafts a different fiction: call it the Found Cause.

In "Manhunt," Mudd, played by Matt Walsh (best known for his role in "Veep," as the beleaguered Mike McLintock), is a sadistic Confederate agent who lives with his young housekeeper and former slave, Mary Simms, played by Lovie Simone, in an arresting performance that captures the struggle between terror and resolve. "I'm going to be part of a

community," Simone's Simms tells Mudd, defying him. "I'm going to be somebody." Mary Simms is not mentioned in Swanson's book. Nor are any of the other people formerly owned by Mudd who testified at his military trial, including Simms's brothers, one of whom Mudd had shot in the leg. (Five of the prosecution's eleven witnesses were former slaves of Mudd's.) Simms's testimony was particularly important in establishing that he carried Confederate mail.

Q. To whom did they bring letters?
A. To Dr. Sam. Mudd.
Q. Now state to the Court whether he would give them any letters to take back.
A. Yes: he gave them letters to take back, and clothes and socks.

But about Booth she could say very little, because, notwithstanding the story told in "Manhunt," she was not at Mudd's house when Booth rode up with a broken leg early on April 15, 1865. The brother of hers who had been shot in the leg had run away in 1863, and Simms herself had fled in 1864, after Maryland abolished slavery.

A. I left him just about a month before Christmas. I was free then: he whipped me, and I ran away.
Q. You left Dr. Mudd's house because he whipped you?
A. Yes, sir.

In the series, Simms and her brother choose, inexplicably, to return to Mudd's house in 1865 and Simms is in the house when Booth arrives; she hides his boot and later directs Stanton to its hiding place. Her testimony, elicited by Stanton, is crucial not so much to Mudd's conviction as to the series' interest in both racial justice and a happy ending. We're also led to believe that Simms—having met with Elizabeth Keckley, a Black writer and seamstress who served as a dressmaker for Mary Todd Lincoln, and having opened a school for Black children—has a grand future ahead of her. In the series' epilogue, we see her wearing a precisely fitted new calico dress, carrying a stack of books, and chatting with other Black students as she arrives at the library of the newly founded Howard University: a door of learning opened.

The facts are less comforting. Mudd, having narrowly avoided hanging, was sentenced to hard labor for life in a prison on an island off the coast of Florida, but in February, 1869, in a ceremony at the White House attended by Mudd's wife, Andrew Johnson signed his pardon. (This coda is not mentioned in "Manhunt.") Mudd went home, resumed his practice, and ran for office. He had nine children and thirty-three grandchildren. His house is now a museum. Mary Simms appears in the 1900 U.S. census as a widowed, sixty-year-old mother of two, living in Bryantown, in another family's house, and working as a cook, and is listed as unable to either read or write. Pray that she was happy, and part of a community, and somebody, surely somebody, to everyone who loved her. But she did not attend Howard University.

You get, onscreen, the civil war you're living. "What if Booth weakened our democracy?" a reporter asks Stanton in the first episode of "Manhunt" (filmed in 2022). Lest you miss any of the clues pointing to the crime of our time, the insurrection at hand, we see a nefarious villain—famous and cosseted, one of the richest men in New York—boasting, as he points a gun at Stanton, "I could fire this on Wall Street in broad daylight and nothing would happen to me." Stanton, however determined to capture Booth, is as hobbled as his prey. In "Manhunt," the War Between the States is a war between two crippled, broken men. "Manhunt" is "The Prisoner of Shark Island" upside down: the Confederates have become the villains. Much else remains the same. The killer is a man with a gun.

The law is a man on a horse. They stagger after each other, armed to the teeth: the least frail man wins.

You also get whatever civil war, or whatever history, that Hollywood is willing to pay for, which, as a rule, involves men, horses, and guns. George Saunders's luminous novel "Lincoln in the Bardo," about the President's grief at the death of his young son Willie, in 1862, became an eerie, three-hundred-and-sixty-degree New York *Times* virtual-reality short in 2017, and feature-film rights were soon sold, but there's still no movie (although an opera is in the works). Nor has there been a film of Geraldine Brooks's Pulitzer Prize-winning 2005 Civil War novel, "March," an exquisitely unsettling upending of "Little Women." And there doesn't appear to be any upcoming adaptation of Karen Joy Fowler's 2022 novel, "Booth," long-listed for the Booker Prize, a book that is to Swanson's "Manhunt" what "Little Dorrit" is to an episode of "Law & Order: Special Victims Unit."

Fowler's searching family saga begins with Richard Booth, "skinny as a stork," a former lawyer and an admirer of the English radical John Wilkes. While living on his family's halfhearted farm in Maryland ("the people who live there call it the farm, though it's half trees"), crafting a new translation of the Aeneid which he will never finish, and helping fugitive slaves escape to Philadelphia, he is given the honor of naming the baby who will become his most famous grandson. Richard Booth's son, Junius, has left his wife and son in England and fled to America with a woman named Mary Ann Holmes. She is left on the farm to raise the children for nine months of the year while her husband tours the country, performing onstage, between bouts of insanity that the family calls his "mad freaks," though they also involve suicide attempts, first by hanging, then by drowning. As for Mary, Fowler writes that, by 1838, the year John Wilkes is born, for "seventeen years, almost without break, she's been either expecting a baby or nursing one. It will be twenty continuous years before she's done."

There was a hole in the middle of the Booth family, something like the phantom limb that lingers after an amputation. "Frederick was the first to die," just one year old, Fowler writes. Then Mary Ann, and baby Elizabeth, and Henry Byron. The sorrow found no bottom. "Let me die," their mother prayed. Their father put stones in his shoes and walked mile after mile after mile, in penance for whatever sins had led to such losses. This was no civil war. Fowler writes, "This grief was a war against the world."

John Wilkes Booth was born into this war and never escaped it. But none of this family drama finds a place in "Manhunt," whose domestic concerns lie chiefly

with the First Family. Lili Taylor gives a riveting performance as Mary Todd Lincoln, herself driven all but mad by the deaths of Willie and another son, Eddie, in 1850, at age three. "All mothers are my sisters," she tells her husband, in a kind of Victorian-style version of America Ferrera's monologue in "Barbie." She's there to speak for every mother who has lost a child, but only because there are few other women or children in the show's world. (Even Mudd's wife and children have been erased.) Hamish Linklater, as Lincoln, is oddly tremulous, and everything about his life as a father is better rendered in Fowler's novel: "Nighttime finds Tad sleeping, curled up like a cat, beneath his father's desk, his head on his father's shoes."

In period drama after period drama, Hollywood producers appear to pride themselves on the exact reproduction of everything from candlesticks to carriages, but they do not seem capable of imagining the lives of women and girls before birth control, safe childbirth, and ready abortion. In Hollywood's version of American history, as in the imagination of the current Supreme Court majority, every man owns a gun and no woman is ever pregnant. Most nineteenth-century American women, whatever their race or wealth or state of servitude, were pregnant or nursing for decades. You hardly ever see them onscreen: no swollen bellies, no leaking breasts, no babies in arms, no toddlers clinging to legs, no lullabies, no "little stone lozenges" like the gravestones that mark the burials of Pip's five infant brothers in "Great Expectations." "Manhunt" tries hard to get Reconstruction right; it gets the warp and woof of daily life quite wrong.

"I did not want to write a book about John Wilkes," Fowler has said. "This is a man who craved attention and has gotten too much of it." She decided to write "Booth" during yet another series of mass shootings in the United States. She wanted to write about the rest of the Booths, the family that nursed the assassin, the family left behind: his brothers Edwin and Junius and his sisters Rosalie and Asia—Asia, who loved John Wilkes the most.

Asia Booth Clarke, three years older than John Wilkes, married an actor and gave birth to nine children, seven in ten years—her "little trotters," she called them. After her brother murdered the President, she moved to England; all three children she bore there died. "It is dreadful to have no babies," she once wrote. On April 15, 1865, she learned of the assassination when, in bed, pregnant with twins, she read about it in the morning newspaper. Eleven days later, when Booth was killed in Virginia, a theatre manager came to tell her the news.

"Is it over?"
"Yes, madam."
"Taken?"
"Yes."
"Dead?"
"Yes, madam."

The twins were born that summer. One, a girl, died the next year. Fowler writes, "They do not name the boy for John."

This is act vee one eye. Long before Lincoln became President, "Macbeth" had been his favorite play. As a young lawyer, he carried a copy of it in his pocket. John Wilkes Booth had often played the title role. "After life's fitful fever he sleeps well," Lincoln had said, days before his death, reading a speech from the play. "After being hunted like a dog . . . I am here in despair," Booth wrote in his last diary entry. "And why? For doing what Brutus was honored for." Booth, the overactor who knew only rage and self-pity, was best known for his performance as Richard III, scheming, enraged, crippled, doomed. A horse! A horse! He performed it, as was standard on the nineteenth-century stage, using a loose seventeenth-century adaptation that cribbed from other Shakespeare plays. "*All quiet—after Richard twice tries to rise and cannot*," he once scrawled on a blank page in his prompt book, across from Richard's dying lines (borrowed from "Henry IV"): "Now let the world no longer be a stage/To feed contention in a lingering act . . . On bloody actions, the rude scene may end,/And darkness be the burier of the dead!" Long after Lincoln's death, as one tale has it, Edwin Booth opened his brother's trunk and found inside theatrical costumes that had belonged to John Wilkes and their father, many stitched by his mother. He tugged them out and burned them: Iago's ruffed tunic, Mark Antony's flowing toga, Richard's long cloak, each by each, in the dead dark of an American night. ♦

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THE ACCIDENTAL *SATIRIST*

How an enthusiast of Soviet socialism fell afoul of the authorities.

BY BENJAMIN KUNKEL

Andrei Platonov's "Chevengur" quixotically traverses revolutionary Russia.

The Roman god Janus was possessed of two faces, one pointing toward the future and one looking backward into the past, and it is tempting to imagine that these faces must also have worn contrasting expressions, one brighter and hopeful, the other rueful or even aghast. Supposing you knew such a person, how would you go about introducing him? Which of the two faces—enthusiastic or downcast—should be presented first? The problem poses itself immediately when it comes to "Chevengur," Andrei Platonov's strange tale of a Communist peasant utopia. Written in 1927 and 1928, when Platonov was in his late twenties, it both represents his high-spirited début as a socialist novelist and reads like a dissident's political suicide note. And, in the split perspective afforded by the book's contradictory point of view, it's possible to see both the initial construction and the ultimate collapse of the Soviet project as overlapping features of the same landscape, in "the deserted shelterlessness of the steppe."

The novel's (very few) first readers were understandably perplexed. On the one hand, here was "an honest attempt to portray the beginning of a communist society," as Platonov described his efforts in a letter to his powerful colleague Maxim Gorky, in 1929, in a bid to secure official approval for the book's publication. Platonov seems to have sincerely thought that his novel depicted the advent of Soviet socialism in a favorable enough light. What authority could take offense at his depiction of a group of peasant citizens invoking collectivization as their salvation from the hunger and toil that constitute the only life they or their forebears have known? On the other hand, here was a work in which the regime's newfangled jargon ("communism," "the proletariat"), however gamely deployed by the unlettered tenants of the open steppe, betrays a welter of confusion, privation, and violence that rivals anything in the bad old pre-Bolshevik days. "Whatever you may have wished," Gorky replied to Platonov, "you have portrayed reality in a lyrico-satirical light that is, of course, unacceptable to our censorship." Gorky was right. Platonov's novel was set up in type, but, at the last minute, the publisher scuttled the project.

Gorky's neologism "lyrico-satirical" is a fair characterization of Platonov's style in "Chevengur" and elsewhere, but it also comes across like one of those references to apparent impossibilities which one encounters in reading about quantum physics: How can light be both particle and wave? In literature, anyway, the lyrical suggests a wave of praise and celebration, whereas the satirical indicates particles of jeering condemnation. The authorities, unable to get a fix on Platonov's attitude, declined to publish "Chevengur" during his lifetime. In fact, this black herald of the dawn of the Soviet experiment didn't appear in Russia until 1988, in the fading dusk of the U.S.S.R. Now, in the third decade of the twenty-first century, a new English-language translation of the novel, by Robert and Elizabeth Chandler (NYRB Classics), gives us another chance to trap the mercury of a prose style that seems intended both (lyrically) to stir one's heart and (satirically) to freeze one's blood, in the same escaping moment of history. Like "lyrico-satirical," the term "history" is a word that can paper over unsolvable ambiguities.

Platonov's career was a victim of his times, but, had he lived a generation earlier, he would probably never have become a writer. Born in 1899, in Voronezh, three hundred miles south of Moscow, he was the son of a watchmaker's daughter and a metalworker

ILLUSTRATION BY BEN HICKEY

employed on the railways. The eldest of eleven children, he was put to work at the age of thirteen and became an insatiable autodidact, reading deeply in philosophy. For working-class young men like Platonov, the Bolshevik Revolution opened up huge vistas of opportunity, not merely for self-betterment but for the creation of a new society. By the time he turned twenty, he was studying engineering and publishing articles and idealistic poems in the local press, at one point as a journalist embedded with the Red Army. When drought brought famine to the region, in 1921, he decided that his engineering skills were needed more than his literary ones and set writing aside to work on the digging of wells and on land-reclamation projects. It was not until 1927 that he began publishing again, drawing his preoccupations and even his style from his close contact with the Russian hinterland.

"Old provincial towns have tumbledown outskirts, and people come straight from nature to live there," Platonov writes at the start of "Chevengur." Already apparent is the studied and graceful clumsiness for which his prose is renowned. How can twentieth-century subjects of the tsar, historical rather than natural beings, come "straight from nature" to live anywhere? Evoking the naïveté of what Marx called "rural idiocy," the phrase summons up a condition of ignorance and illiteracy so deep and unchanging as to encourage hardscrabble people to accept their pinched conditions as natural, in much the same way that a nonhuman animal might take for granted the horns on its head or the spots of its coat. In the next sentence, "A man appears, with a keen-eyed face that has been worn to an extreme of sadness, a man who can fix up or equip anything but who has himself lived through life unequipped."

The man is one Zahkar Pavlovich, the focus of the first (more or less pre-revolutionary) section of "Chevengur." Based in part on Platonov's father, he is a barely literate handyman who, in his love of neat and dry machinery, as opposed to the moist and messy operations of mere nature, has unwittingly been dreaming of socialism throughout his five decades of life, and is therefore delighted to get a job stoking train engines: "Zakhar Pavlovich respected coal, wrought iron, sleeping raw materials, and half-manufactured items of all kinds, but he truly loved and sensed only the finished artifacts into which man had been transformed through labor and that would live on further with a life of their own."

In "Chevengur," the great revolutionary events of the late teens and early nineteen-twenties—the various ephemeral triumphs of history over nature—typically take place in the misty background of the cascading story. For us, as for the book's characters, it's often difficult to tell when, exactly, things shift from the end of tsarism to the eruption of the Russian civil war to the advent of war communism under Lenin. At any rate, Zakhar soon takes under his wing, as a fellow railway worker, our true protagonist, Sasha Dvanov, a young man who, with the heroic simplicity characteristic of Platonov's people, seems to have taken literally Marx's dictum that revolutions are "the locomotives of history." As post-revolutionary factions multiply, Sasha, an orphan of the hungry land, decides that he should assign himself to one political movement or another. He and Zakhar set about "looking for the most serious party, in order to join it at once," ideally one "that had no incomprehensible program and where everything they said was clear and true."

It's possible to glimpse a good deal of Platonov's singular tone and method in a scene in which Sasha and Zakhar, frustrated that no faction will disclose "precisely how and when earthly bliss would dawn," hastily barter off their political allegiances with the representatives of various parties:

> Some replied that happiness was a complex artifact and that man's aim lay not in happiness but in the zealous fulfillment of historical laws. And others said that happiness was a matter of out-and-out struggle, which would last eternally. . . .
>
> From the next party they heard that man was such a magnificent and greedy being that it was strange even to think about sating him with happiness—that would be the end of the world.
>
> "Just what we need!" said Zakhar Pavlovich.
>
> Behind the end door in the corridor was the very last party, with the very longest name. There was only one gloomy man sitting there; the others had gone off to exercise their power.
>
> "What do you want?"
>
> "We both want to join. Will it be the end of everything soon?"
>
> "Socialism, you mean?" the man misunderstood. "A year from now. Today we're merely occupying institutions."
>
> "Then put our names down," said Zakhar Pavlovich joyfully.

The party with the very longest name is none other than the Russian Social-Democratic Party of Bolsheviks, or Lenin's Communist Party. Sizing up its lone provincial representative, Zakhar thinks: "Probably he stood for the very cleverest of powers; within a year this power would either construct the whole world once and for all or else kick up a futility to exhaust even the heart of a child." Like dozens of other passages in the austere but overspilling world of "Chevengur," this one displays the way that Platonov's fiction pulls in different directions at once. The earnestness with which the characters take revolutionary slogans at face value can quickly send their aspirations for earthly bliss sliding toward sarcasm, even as the general collapse or razing of language (" 'Socialism, you mean?' the man misunderstood") accompanies the raising of a new social structure. And, all the while, "the heart of a child" is perpetually preserved in the lyricism of the prose, as a sort of incorruptible judge of the antic, grim, and unrelenting proceedings of the story.

Before long, Sasha, in his forlorn wanderlust, has split up with Zakhar and fallen in with a fellow-Bolshevik named Stepan Kopionkin. Addressing each other as "Comrade," they set out across the post-revolutionary landscape, surveying peasant life and ultimately reaching, by separate routes, a place named Chevengur, whose inhabitants are rumored to have swapped stark famine for the teeming abundance of Communism. Sasha "liked the word *Chevengur*. It sounded like the enticing hum of an unknown country."

Sasha and Stepan embark on their quest with the civil war "evident all around them, in shards and splinters of the nation's possessions: dead horses, carts, brigands' coats and pillows." If the first part of the novel might be

described as a bildungsroman, the second is a kind of bloody picaresque, shot through with allusions to "Don Quixote," though the Cervantine comedy is registered less in laughter than in grimaces. Stepan, a Quixote to Sasha's Sancho Panza, rides a dreary cart horse named—whether lyrically or satirically on Platonov's part—Strength of the Proletariat, and the tumbling incidents that ensue are hardly less absurd in Platonov's narration than they are in the bare enumeration of them: a near-fatal run-in with anarchist raiders; a parley with a man who keeps a cockroach as a pet; an overnight stay with a peasant named Pashintsev, who has single-handedly defended the Revolution, so he says, against White, or tsarist, soldiers, using homemade armor and dud grenades.

Marx famously said that all world-historical events happen twice, first as tragedy and then as farce. But if you are short on time you can combine the two and stage a farce every bit as violent as the fifth act of a Jacobean tragedy: "Kopionkin saw brigands and members of the White Guard as enemies of minor importance, unworthy of his personal fury, and he killed with the same scrupulous everyday diligence with which a peasant woman weeds her millet. He fought accurately but without wasting time, without stopping or dismounting, unconsciously preserving his own feelings for further hope and movement."

The bumptious and harrowing music of the novel's first two sections is already enough to make "Chevengur" one of the more amazing works of twentieth-century fiction. In the third and final part, however, the work becomes less an ordinary novel, of whatever extraordinary kind, than a different genre of writing entirely. It evolves into a kind of utopia, not in the usual sense of a work depicting a world better than our own but in the Marxist critic Fredric Jameson's sense of portraying a society undeniably and radically other than the one we know.

Once Sasha and Stepan have at last crossed the corpse-littered emptiness of southern Russia and reached Chevengur, they confront a society that simultaneously flouts and confirms the basic precepts of Marxism: one of hunger and leisure, where work is disowned in the name of the laboring masses. Nobody in Chevengur, whose residents proclaim that they are establishing Communism, appears to have so much as consulted "The Communist Manifesto." "Does everyone here have to read Karl Marx?" asks Stepan of a Chevengurian by the name of Chepurny. Not at all, Chepurny answers: "I haven't read him either, not in all my born days. I've just picked up a little at rallies and demonstrations—enough for agitation and propaganda. And there's really no need to read anything at all. In the old days, people read and wrote, but they didn't do any goddamn living." Despite all this, life in Chevengur makes the reality of the proletariat—of the dispossessed as a collective entity with the power to make their passive abjection into the active subject of historical change—as palpable a phenomenon as it has ever been in modern literature. Here, Sasha, melding in his own way with the masses, trades his status as the novel's main character for the point of view of Chepurny:

> In the past, Chepurny too had wandered about with other people in search of temporary work and had slept in sheds and barns, surrounded by comrades and insured by their fellow feeling against inescapable troubles—but he had failed to grasp that such a mutually inseparable life was to his own benefit. Now he saw with his own eyes the steppe and the sun, and people located on this mound between the earth and the sun but who possessed neither of them—and he sensed for the first time how in place of the steppe, the homes, the food, and the clothes that the bourgeoisie had acquired for themselves, the proletarians on the mound possessed one another, since everyone needs to possess something. When property lies between people, they calmly expend their powers on concerns about that property, but when there is nothing between people, then they choose not to part from one another and to preserve one another from cold in their sleep.

In the end, the collective experiment that is Chevengur finds itself fending off an attack from outside soldiers. With perfect Platonovian ambiguity, it is impossible to say whether the assailants are Whites (tsarists) or Reds (Soviets)—in other words, whether Communism, at least of Platonov's ramshackle, anarchic kind, finally falls victim to the past or to the future.

Platonov was still a young man, by the calendar, anyway, when he completed "Chevengur" and saw its hopes for publication dashed. He fared no better with "The Foundation Pit," a short novel completed in 1930, which didn't appear in the Soviet Union until the glasnost days of 1987. This time, the reaction of the authorities couldn't have come as too much of a surprise, given that "The Foundation Pit" reads like a parody of such socialist-realist works as Fyodor Gladkov's "Cement" (1925), whose hero overcomes personal despair to contribute to the reorganization of a local cement factory. "The Foundation Pit" concerns the collective excavation of a site for an enormous apartment building meant to house the local proletariat but unlikely, as the story ends, to ever be constructed—a hole of futility and death, like a common grave.

The year after Platonov finished "The Foundation Pit," Stalin wrote "fool," "idiot," and "scum" in the margins of one of the author's stories, and then contacted the publishers of the journal it appeared in, calling him "an agent of our enemies." In 1934, the Soviet Literary Encyclopedia complained that Platonov showed "the Soviet state apparatus not as a form of the participation of workers and peasants in governing the country, but as a mechanical apparatus of coercion, of the leveling down of the individual." In 1938, Platonov's fifteen-year-old son was arrested on charges of subversive activity, almost certainly confected in order to keep Platonov in line. The boy spent three years in the Gulag; though a powerful literary friend eventually secured his release, he had by then contracted a fatal case of tuberculosis.

Platonov's ideological errors were never quite enough to rule out a literary career altogether, and he remained a paid-up member of the Soviet writer's union for the rest of his life. During the Second World War, he served as a correspondent for the newspaper *Red Star* and was able to publish excerpts of a final longish work of fiction, the

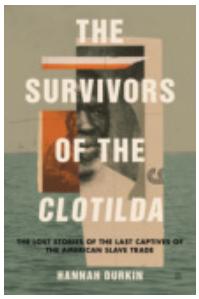
novella "Dzhan" (or "Soul"), in which an impeccably socialist-realist plotline, to do with shepherding a Central Asian people out of immemorial poverty and into Communism, doesn't seem to preclude a deep personal horror at widespread hunger. The very same horror animates the early chapters of "Chevengur"—something that makes the arguably anti-Soviet novel also an undeniably socialist production.

Platonov died in 1951, from tuberculosis, which he most likely caught as he nursed his dying son. In the nearly seventy-five years since, he has enjoyed several posthumous careers. First, during the nineteen-seventies, he was a dissident writer, his major works finally published in the West but available inside the Soviet Union only in samizdat form, while exiled Russians such as Joseph Brodsky lionized him as one of the half-dozen greatest novelists of the twentieth century.

By the time the U.S.S.R. fell apart, in 1991, it was no longer the cackling mockery of agitprop language but the element of possibility and sincere hope that had become more striking in Platonov, at least to left-wing Western intellectuals. For Fredric Jameson, in his 1994 book, "The Seeds of Time," the catastrophic peasant utopia of "Chevengur" represented no kind of ideal society—but it did indicate the deep and discreetly enduring potential for a different way of relating to time, death, and the vast demographic reality of other people (the notorious "masses") than was on offer during the thoroughly commercial and individualistic "end of history" of the nineties.

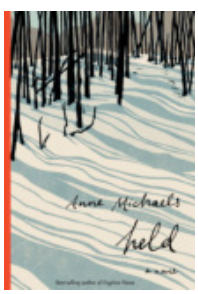
In our time, three decades later, the return of mass hunger to the world scene—with tens of millions on the brink of starvation, thanks to war, inflation, and climate change—means that a famine-stalked utopian or dystopian revolutionary novel such as "Chevengur" no longer reads merely as an ambiguous testament to a vanished Soviet past: the revival of such an old and essential problem is bound to reawaken bygone political programs, too, no matter what names they go under. "What's the word for those thoughts that flow first this way, then that way?" Stepan asks Sasha. "Dilemmas?" "Dialectics," Sasha imperturbably replies. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED

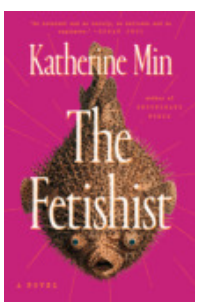


The Survivors of the Clotilda, *by Hannah Durkin (Amistad)*. The last known slave ship to reach U.S. soil, the Clotilda, arrived in 1860, more than fifty years after the transatlantic slave trade was federally outlawed. This history details the lives of the people it carried, from their kidnappings in West Africa to their deaths in the twentieth century. Durkin, a scholar of slavery and the African diaspora, traces them to communities in Alabama established by the formerly enslaved, such as Africatown and Gee's Bend, and finds in their stories antecedents for the Harlem Renaissance and the civil-rights movement. Amid descriptions of child trafficking, sexual abuse, and racial violence, Durkin also celebrates the resilience and resistance of the Clotilda's survivors. "Their lives were so much richer than the countless crimes committed against them," she writes.

Goodbye Russia, *by Fiona Maddocks (Pegasus)*. This biography of Sergei Rachmaninoff focusses on the quarter century that he spent in exile in the United States, after the Russian Revolution, when he established himself across the West as a highly sought-after concert pianist. In place of extensive compositional analyses (during this time, the composer wrote only six new pieces), Maddocks offers a character study punctuated by colorful source material, including acerbic diary entries by Prokofiev, which betray both envy of and affection for his competitor. Maddocks notes such idiosyncrasies as Rachmaninoff's infatuation with fast cars, but she also captures his sense of otherness; he never became fluent in English, and his yearning for a lost Russia shadowed his monumental success.



Held, *by Anne Michaels (Knopf)*. This episodic, philosophical novel orbits a group of loosely connected characters living between 1917 and 2025. It begins in France, during the First World War, with a British soldier lying on the ground after an explosion. We follow him home to North Yorkshire, where he works as a portrait photographer in whose images spirits begin to appear. Later, we meet his granddaughter, who provides medical care in war zones. Throughout, characters ponder the boundaries between the physical and the ineffable, the mortal and the spiritual. Sometimes they reach epigrammatic epiphanies, as when one realizes that "everything she had thought of as loss was something found."



The Fetishist, *by Katherine Min (Putnam)*. The blooming and dissolution of a romance forms the core of this wistful, often funny, posthumously published novel. "Once Asian, never again Caucasian," jokes Alma, a Korean American concert cellist, to Daniel, a white violinist, the first night they sleep together. Eventually, Alma will break off their engagement after discovering that Daniel, the book's titular fetishist, has been having an affair with another Asian American woman. When that woman dies by suicide, her daughter seeks revenge. The resulting series of escalating high jinks, which includes the use of blowfish poison, verges on the farcical, but the novel's major chord is one of rueful longing.

MUSICAL EVENTS

TONE POET

Arnold Schoenberg's sonic palette affected everything from film scores to jazz.

BY ALEX ROSS

Of the thousands of German-speaking Jews who fled from Nazi-occupied Europe to the comparative paradise of Los Angeles, Arnold Schoenberg seemed especially unlikely to make himself at home. He was, after all, the most implacable modernist composer of the day—the progenitor of atonality, the codifier of twelve-tone music, a Viennese firebrand who relished polemics as a sport. He once wrote, "If it is art, it is not for all, and if it is for all, it is not art." The prevailing attitude in the Hollywood film industry, the dominant cultural concern in Schoenberg's adopted city, was the opposite: if it's not for all, it's worthless.

Yet there he was, the composer of "Transfigured Night" and "Pierrot Lunaire," living in Brentwood, across the street from Shirley Temple. He took a liking to Jackie Robinson, the Marx Brothers, and the radio quiz show "Information Please." He played tennis with George Gershwin, who idolized him. He delighted in the American habits of his children, who, to the alarm of other émigrés, ran all over the house. (Thomas Mann, after a visit, wrote in his diary, "Impertinent kids. Excellent Viennese coffee.") He taught at U.S.C., at U.C.L.A., and at home, counting John Cage, Lou Harrison, and Oscar Levant among his students. Although he faced a degree of indifference and hostility from audiences, he had experienced worse in Austria and Germany. He made modest concessions to popular taste, writing a harmonically lush adaptation of the Kol Nidre for Rabbi Jacob Sonderling, of the Fairfax Temple. He died in Los Angeles in 1951, an eccentric but proud American.

Schoenberg died in Los Angeles in 1951, an eccentric but proud American.

The Schoenberg family retains a strong presence in L.A. today. Two of the composer's children—Ronald, a retired judge, and Lawrence, a retired high-school math teacher—still live in the area. Ronald occupies his father's house, sharing it with his wife, Barbara Zeisl Schoenberg, the daughter of the émigré composer Eric Zeisl. Ronald and Barbara's son Randy is a lawyer who specializes in the recovery of art looted by the Nazis; in 2004, he won a landmark case before the Supreme Court, resulting in the return of five paintings by Gustav Klimt. (The episode was dramatized in the film "Woman in Gold," with Randy portrayed, somewhat against type, by Ryan Reynolds.) Members of the clan regularly attend performances of Schoenberg's music in Los Angeles, delivering brisk judgments in the tradition of the paterfamilias.

Last summer, I was invited to a private concert at the historic Brentwood house. Three generations of Schoenbergs were present: I sat next to Randy's son Joey, who collaborated with his father on a genealogical documentary titled "Fioretta," which follows the family's history back to sixteenth-century Venice. On an armchair sat a photograph of Schoenberg holding a class in the same space. Members of the BASC Quartet, a young L.A.-based group, were on hand to play the composer's First and Third Quartets, which they had been studying in advance of a residency at the Schoenberg Center, in Vienna. (The center houses Schoenberg's main archive, every page of which has been digitized and made accessible online.) The First Quartet precedes Schoenberg's break from tonality; the Third is from his twelve-tone period. In this setting, though, all the old mishegoss over dissonance and dodecaphony seemed beside the point. The BASC Quartet—perhaps spurred on by the gaze of so many look-alike eyes—

ILLUSTRATION BY MARCELLUS HALL

found the through line of Schoenberg's personality, which is by turns impassioned, whimsical, savage, and melancholy. This is difficult music, to be sure, but it is fully human, bristlingly alive.

The hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of Schoenberg's birth arrives in September. A dedicated Web site, Schoenberg150, documents a surge of performances in Europe. Activity in America is far more meagre. The only top-tier orchestras that are playing original music by Schoenberg in the 2023-24 season are the San Francisco Symphony, the Cincinnati Symphony, and the Minnesota Orchestra. The L.A. Philharmonic, Schoenberg's home-town ensemble, has performed only four of his works in the past ten seasons; the Berlin Philharmonic has featured as many in the past two months. Next season, the L.A. Phil will make partial amends by mounting Schoenberg's gargantuan oratorio "Gurrelieder."

It fell to Jacaranda Music, a twenty-year-old, exuberantly inventive chamber-music series based in Santa Monica, to give Schoenberg proper honors in his final homeland. Under the leadership of Patrick Scott, Jacaranda has presented scores by more than two hundred composers, most of them active after 1900. And, one evening in 2013, Jacaranda persuaded the keepers of the Santa Monica Pier Carousel to entertain riders with an all-twentieth-century playlist, ranging from Mahler's Fourth Symphony to Gubaidulina's St. John Passion. Sadly, in the wake of the pandemic, the organization found that it was unable to keep going. Its farewell season, "Planet Schoenberg," unfolded from September to February, at the First Presbyterian Church of Santa Monica. The title alluded to a line from the German Symbolist poet Stefan George, one that Schoenberg set to music in his Second Quartet: "I feel air from another planet."

Works from various stages of Schoenberg's career anchored the series: the string sextet "Transfigured Night," a feast of overripe Romanticism; the First Chamber Symphony, a hard-driving exploration of tonality's outer edges; the song cycle "The Book of the Hanging Gardens," which hovers vertiginously at the border of atonality; the Five Piano Pieces, Op. 23, an inaugural exercise in twelve-tone writing; and the semi-tonal "Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte," which uses Byron's verbal assault on Napoleon to commemorate the war against Hitler. Together, these scores showed the spectacular variety of Schoenberg's language. At no time did he call for the end of tonality; nor did he stop writing tonal music. Tonality, he said, "is not a necessity for a piece of music, but rather a possibility."

That radical expansion of the harmonic field had a sweeping influence on all subsequent composers, whether or not they followed Schoenberg explicitly. Hollywood composers paid particularly close attention to Schoenberg's music, and some studied with him directly. The great man was not displeased to receive these genuflections, although he appeared to resent the idea that his non-tonal vocabulary was useful primarily as an expressive crutch for scenes of tension and terror. Years ago, David Raksin, who wrote music for "Laura" and other classic films, told me that he once asked Schoenberg how he should score an airplane sequence. Schoenberg archly replied, "Like *big bees*, only *louder*."

At the final Jacaranda concert, the pianist and conductor Scott Dunn illustrated the Schoenberg-Hollywood relationship by playing three pieces by Leonard Rosenman, who took private lessons with Schoenberg in 1947. Rosenman wasn't writing for the movies at the time; that transition came about when one of his piano students, James Dean, was cast in "East of Eden" and got his teacher hired along with him. (Dean, a modern-music fan, liked to tell an anecdote about Schoenberg's Violin Concerto: after Jascha Heifetz complained that he would need to grow a sixth finger to master the piece, Schoenberg supposedly said, "I can wait.") Rosenman began employing twelve-tone methods in his film scores. During the planetarium scene in "Rebel Without a Cause," the orchestra dissolves into a magnificent Schoenbergian melee. It's hard to imagine how Hollywood could have functioned without the language of dissonance. The horror genre wouldn't even exist.

Perhaps the finest recording ever made of "Transfigured Night" came from a group of studio-orchestra players: the golden-toned Hollywood Quartet, augmented by two colleagues, in 1950. As it happens, Jacaranda's long-time resident string group, the Lyris Quartet, is also made up of veteran studio musicians, and their "Transfigured Night," in January, extended the local tradition of back-lot Schoenberg love. (The full complement of performers was Alyssa Park, Luanne Homzy, Luke Maurer, Erik Rynearson, Timothy Loo, and Charlie Tyler.) They brought out not only the work's sumptuous Klimtian hues but also the almost cubistic sharpness of its contrapuntal lines. Similar virtues were evident in a rambunctious version of the First Chamber Symphony, under Mark Alan Hilt's direction, with the Lyris forming the core of the ensemble.

Jacaranda illuminated another aspect of Schoenberg's wide reach: the sympathy he elicits among jazz musicians. Pioneers of jazz hardly needed to take direction from European modernism, yet Schoenberg's pungent chords caught their ears. The jazz guitarist and composer Dennis Sandole was a close reader of Schoenberg's textbook "Harmonielehre"; Sandole, in turn, mentored John Coltrane. That connection justified the most surprising choice of repertory in Jacaranda's series: a nine-piece arrangement of Coltrane's "A Love Supreme," featuring the composer-percussionist Kahil El'Zabar, the saxophonist David Murray, and the Ethnic Heritage Ensemble. This was a joy to hear, despite sound-balance problems. There may be a Saint John Coltrane Church in San Francisco, but his music doesn't benefit from church acoustics.

On the same program, Steven Vanhauwaert, one of several brilliant local pianists who added lustre to "Planet Schoenberg" (others were Gloria Cheng and Inna Faliks), played Schoenberg's Five Pieces, Op. 23. I don't know if Vanhauwaert was deliberately searching out phantom jazz moments in the music, but his free-floating, semi-improvisational approach fit the cross-genre agenda. In the final measures of the third piece, four-note chords jangle against the elemental fifth of C and G, each giving off a smoky, sassy vibe. If it's not jazz, it's not from an entirely different planet. And, if it's not for all, it's for anyone who wants it. ♦

THE THEATRE

TALKING WITH GOD

John Patrick Shanley's "Doubt: A Parable" and "Brooklyn Laundry."

BY VINSON CUNNINGHAM

Amy Ryan and Liev Schreiber play a nun and a priest in boxerly conversation.

It's been a good few months for catching up on the work of the playwright John Patrick Shanley. Last fall, the Lucille Lortel Theatre put on a revival of Shanley's seedy, stormy, aggressive love story, from 1983, "Danny and the Deep Blue Sea"—a production most notable, thinking back on it, for its announcement of a new level of ambition on the part of Aubrey Plaza, who starred as the tough, lost Roberta.

Now, this spring—the Lenten timing is appropriate, perhaps, for this God-haunted writer—there's a Shanley double bill. "Doubt: A Parable," his Pulitzer Prize-winning drama, from 2004, about a fraught episode at a Catholic school and parish, is in revival at the Todd Haimes Theatre, produced by the Roundabout and directed by Scott Ellis. "Brooklyn Laundry," Shanley's newest play, a tragicomic romance about the excruciating fickleness of fate, is at Manhattan Theatre Club's New York City Center Stage I, under Shanley's own direction.

Shanley's plays are, in some ways, perfect examples of the form. He does the classic thing: gets people into a room and makes them talk in ways that spark unlikely action. He often writes for pairs, forgoing party scenes or crowded rooms full of overlapping speech; instead, Shanley frequently has one person meet up with another, one couple at a time, letting the conversation become dialectical, almost boxerly, coaxing new situations, social and personal, out of head-on verbal confrontation. If Shanley's people occasionally say or do unlikely or unrealistic things, it's only because of their preternatural willingness to roll up their sleeves and talk rather than fight. There's a hint of violence in much of his work, just as the possibility of bloodshed hangs over so much political rhetoric. The subtext in both cases: all this yapping is what we do to stave off war.

"Doubt" is set in motion with a kind of philosophical discourse between two nuns. Sister Aloysius (Amy Ryan), the principal of a Catholic school in the Bronx, is an emissary of the past. She thinks that discipline is the true path to godliness and a proper education, and that a pedagogue shouldn't insinuate herself into friendships with students. She's scolding a new teacher, Sister James (Zoe Kazan), an obviously friendly, sweet presence. Sister Aloysius charges that the young woman is far too invested—to the point of a subtle narcissism—in how much her students like her.

SISTER ALOYSIUS: Don't be charmed by cleverness. Not theirs. And not yours. I think you are a competent teacher, Sister James, but maybe not our best teacher. The best teachers do not perform, they cause the students to perform.

SISTER JAMES: Do I perform?

SISTER ALOYSIUS: As if on a Broadway stage.

SISTER JAMES: Oh dear. I had no conception!

SISTER ALOYSIUS: You're showing off. You like to see yourself ten feet tall in their eyes.

Lines like these are good for a laugh, but their deepest implications get quite dark quite quickly. Sister James has noticed that one of her students, Donald Muller—the boy never appears in the play, but he is the locus of its most harrowing conversations—has become an object of special attention for the parish priest, Father Flynn (Liev Schreiber), whose poetic, intellectually pert sermon on the topic of doubt is the first thing we hear in the play. The priest and the child have spent time alone together, and after one meeting Donald returned to Sister James's class acting strange, his

ILLUSTRATION BY HOKYOUNG KIM

breath redolent of sacramental wine.

Sister James is hesitant to assume the worst of Father Flynn: he seems like a nice guy, open and warm, and willing to consider secular songs such as "Frosty the Snowman" for the school's Christmas pageant. Sister Aloysius hates that idea: " 'Frosty the Snowman' espouses a pagan belief in magic," she says. "The snowman comes to life when an enchanted hat is put on his head. If the music were more somber, people would realize the images are disturbing and the song heretical. . . . It should be banned from the airwaves."

Father Flynn finds this attitude intolerant, and he invokes Vatican II—the ecumenical council whose purpose was to "open" the Roman Catholic Church to the modern world—as a prompt to lower the walls of formality among priests and nuns and the people they serve. But open doors and lower walls can create space for devils to stroll in unimpeded, and Shanley suggests how abusers might twist the logic of Vatican II to their own nefarious ends.

At its best, "Doubt" is about formality. Sister Aloysius anxiously adheres to the rules forbidding one-on-one meetings between priests and nuns. The only three-person scene comes when the nuns draw Father Flynn into Sister Aloysius's office to ambush him on the topic of Donald. She wants to forestall the kind of tête-à-tête that makes up the texture of Shanley's dramaturgy. When, at Flynn's insistence, a one-on-one finally does occur, something like the truth starts to emerge just as the dance of formality fades.

Donald's mother, Mrs. Muller (an affecting Quincy Tyler Bernstine), is summoned to Sister Aloysius's office, where she's alarmed by the formal setting; like anyone who has, at one time or another, been schooled, she knows that the principal's office means trouble. She'd rather avoid that static. Donald is the only Black student in the school, and he'd transferred from a public school where "they were gonna kill him," his mother says. Horribly, Mrs. Muller would prefer to have Donald, an eighth grader, stay "just till June"—no matter the nature of the relationship between him and Father Flynn—so that he can make it into a good high school and, later, into college. "Maybe some of them boys want to get caught," she reasons. "What you don't know maybe is my son is . . . that way." Bernstine plays the role with touching pathos and monstrous control, the sort you only develop under the crushing weight of that worst American formality—the color line.

Just like "Doubt," Shanley's new play, "Brooklyn Laundry," employs a series of deeply meaningful duets. Fran (a moving Cecily Strong) and Owen (David Zayas) encounter each other at a laundromat that Owen owns. Early in their first discussion, Owen breezily mentions God, and that sets Fran off. "Do you believe in God?" she asks, in irritated disbelief. "Yeah, why not?" Owen says. He "hit the jackpot" by winning two settlements and is now his own boss. Case closed. This question—although it never comes up again, at least not explicitly—is drastically important to the rest of the action. Fran is a bit like Biblical Job: she's got a dying sister with two children, and before the play's end more awful and unbelievable contingencies come flying into her life like a plague of locusts. She never stages a confrontation with God, or with fate, the way Job does, but the play keeps asking, as if stunned, why things happen as they do, and whether a budding love can survive the slings and arrows of a seemingly unguided existence.

As Fran talks and talks—not only with Owen but also with her sick sister, Trish (Florencia Lozano), and their other, more uptight sister, Susie (Andrea Syglowski)—it's hard not to think about how two of Shanley's lasting interests, on display brilliantly in these plays, fit together. God and fate on the one hand, talk on the other. Eventually, Fran and Owen have dinner, both high on mushrooms. The lights glow, and slowly their fears subside, and they start to confide. "This is the best conversation I've ever had!" Fran says. The unending volley of speech in Shanley's plays, one utterance after another, is its own homegrown theology. Life makes better sense when you stop and talk it out. ♦

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BODIES OF EVIDENCE

"Love Lies Bleeding."

BY RICHARD BRODY

Some filmmakers use the conventions of genre as guideposts as they lead viewers into strange territory, as Jordan Peele did with horror in "Get Out." Others use the same markers to keep viewers on well-worn paths. The British filmmaker Rose Glass's début feature, "Saint Maud," from 2019—in which a young nurse pursues religious faith to the point of delusion—promised in its early scenes to be a modern classic of fanaticism along the lines of Paul Schrader's "First Reformed." But Glass pressed the action into the sensational tropes of horror and left the characters and the subject undeveloped. In her second feature, "Love Lies Bleeding," she does something similar—but to different effect. The movie, shot from a script by Glass and Weronika Tofilska, is based on a good idea, a battle to reveal the hidden grip of a predatory small-town patriarch, but here, too, Glass's reliance on genre conventions—in this case, those of neo-noir—prevents her from fully working out the narrative premise. The result is more entertaining this time, though, because Glass fashions the premise into such a clever, brisk, and twisty story.

Kristen Stewart and Katy O'Brian star in Rose Glass's film.

The focus of "Love Lies Bleeding" is a young woman, Lou (Kristen Stewart), who's stuck in her New Mexico home town. She's a gym manager with little to manage but much grunt work to do; the film's first sequence finds her unclogging a toilet with a gloved hand. Lou can't take her eyes off a new arrival at the gym, a well-muscled woman named Jackie (Katy O'Brian), who works at a gun range. Jackie is a drifter who has hitchhiked to town en route to Las Vegas, where she plans to take part in a bodybuilding competition. She and Lou become lovers the same night they meet and, the next morning, Jackie moves in.

The town's evil patriarch is Lou's father, Lou, Sr. (Ed Harris), who owns the gym and the gun range, and also, essentially, the police department. He's been getting away with murder for years, and when Lou was younger he involved her in his crimes. She loathes him but remains tethered to him, because she must stay in town to help her sister, Beth (Jena Malone), who is trapped in an abusive marriage to a guy named J.J. (Dave Franco). Lou also wants to help Jackie, and offers her a supply of illegal steroid shots to boost her chances in Las Vegas. Jackie quickly bulks up but also develops a severe case of 'roid rage, leading to a terrifying act of vigilante justice. Now Lou must find a way to dispose of evidence. Thanks to Lou, Sr.,'s horrific example, Lou knows what to do, but her father, ever tentacular, gets wind of what's going on. Fearing that the young lovers will expose his bloody deeds, he lays plans to silence them—and anyone else he thinks may compromise him.

The tale unfolds with wit and dramatic flair. Even on second viewing, with surprises dispelled and spoilers spoiled, the twists hold up, as engrossing to anticipate as they previously were to be jolted by. But this is a movie that gives with one hand and takes away with the other, and as its pleasures mount so, too, does a sense of emptiness. The events onscreen don't feel so much observed as dispensed, as if the filmmaker's inspirations peaked at the keyboard. Glass pegs "Love Lies Bleeding" to its genre with splashes of gore, garish light effects, and flamboyantly grotesque idiosyncrasies, such as Lou, Sr.,'s affection for big and exotic insects, and his conspicuously dubious hair style.

Amid the generalized atmosphere of seaminess, the specifics of the main characters' lives get elided. Lou's traumatic past is examined only as much as is necessary to establish, in a series of quick flashbacks, her participation in her father's crimes. The movie, cutting from one plot point to the next, doesn't give the two women much space or time for the sorts of offhand conversation that can reveal character; they share few confidences and disclose no observations or opinions, no tastes or distastes. What they do share is sexual desire. Their mutual attraction is the movie's prime force. Most of the sex scenes, while forthright, are conventional, with rounds of writhing and panting, but one of them, rooted in the couple's explicit talk about pleasure, is unusual and acute. Ultimately, though,

ILLUSTRATION BY LEONIE BOS

desire seems to be all that defines the women's bond.

The movie's incuriosity about the characters' larger ideas and experiences dulls one of its enticing peculiarities. "Love Lies Bleeding" is a period piece, set in 1989, an era evoked from the start by an odd collection of vintage cars, including Lou's two-tone pickup. People make calls on landlines and pay phones, and a news broadcast reports East Germans facing no opposition as they jubilantly cross over to the West. Yet Lou and Jackie have nothing to say about the events of their time and show little interest in the wider world. The one cultural object in Lou's apartment is a 1988 book of short stories by Patrick Califia, "Macho Sluts," a pioneering work of lesbian B.D.S.M. literature; it gets more attention from a nosy F.B.I. agent than from Lou or Jackie.

In this regard, "Love Lies Bleeding" is very much a movie of the current moment; it resembles such acclaimed recent releases as "Past Lives" and "All of Us Strangers" in its presentation of protagonists whose intellectual and cultural lives are portrayed only to the extent that they serve the plot. Today, the labor of movies is increasingly being outsourced—to viewers. Many films are basically kits that require the audience to do the work not merely of interpretation but of characterization, based on a handful of clues. For Lou, these details are her sisterly bond with Beth and her criminal one with the father she hates; as for Jackie, she was adopted at thirteen—a bullied fat kid who therefore learned to fight, and then fled the religious narrowness of her home town in rural Oklahoma. Those specifics frame "Love Lies Bleeding" as a game of cinematic Mad Libs, inviting viewers to fill in the blanks with whatever traits, interests, inclinations, enthusiasms, and backstories they like.

Such blankness is all the stranger because Glass nods to a film that relies on similar material but achieves far more with it—the first-generation noir classic "Bigger Than Life," from 1956, which has the distinction of being, in effect, a primordial 'roid-rage movie. Directed by Nicholas Ray and based on reporting, in this magazine, by Berton Roueché, the movie stars James Mason as a schoolteacher named Ed who is given a diagnosis of a vascular disease that would likely be fatal were it not for a new "miracle drug," cortisone. But the medicine has side effects, and Ed experiences grandiose delusions that ultimately make him violent. Ray symbolizes this derangement with startling images, at one point using forced perspective to make Ed appear taller than a school building. Taking a cue from Ray, Glass briefly, ingeniously depicts the steroid-addled Jackie as an actual giant able to grab people as if they were dolls. But where the framework of "Bigger Than Life" is a starting point for surprisingly far-reaching psychological and cultural explorations, the framework of "Love Lies Bleeding" serves as a boundary limiting both character and context.

Although the roles in Glass's film are not deeply defined, she nonetheless revels in the presence and manner of her actors, whose formidable personalities burst out of the tight bonds of plot to give the film a plausible semblance of life. I first took note of O'Brian's assertive vigor in the wan Marvel contrivance "Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania" (2023), where she was one of the few authentic elements. And though the part of Jackie is more of a showcase than a genuine challenge, it's good to see her given more screen time and a greater variety of situations in which to develop her talent. Stewart, of course, has not lacked for leading roles, but "Love Lies Bleeding" does more than spotlight her distinctive artistry; it suggests aspects of her acting that remain untapped. Her star power is atypical: she doesn't so much fill the screen, the way most charismatic actors do, as bend it to fit her by a force of will so natural that it hardly looks like any effort at all. That's why her performances appear as casual as they are intense, why her acting seems nearly like not acting.

With this singular style, Stewart dominates "Love Lies Bleeding." Glass deploys Stewart's mode of performance as a familiar element, and, instead of becoming the character, the character becomes Stewart. But there's another, less seen side to Stewart: her virtuosity. In Pablo Larraín's film "Spencer" (2021), she incarnated Princess Diana so completely as to render herself nearly unrecognizable. She hasn't yet had a role that fuses both sides of her talent, the personality and the creativity, the nature and the inventiveness. Ultimately, the true genre of "Love Lies Bleeding" is a Kristen Stewart movie. That genre, too, is one that the director neither expands nor reinvents. ♦

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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Mads Horwath, must be received by Sunday, March 17th. The finalists in the March 4th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the April 1st issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST

" "

.....

THE FINALISTS

"Your wish may be granted within three to five business days."
Colin Beasor, Albany, N.Y.

"Yes, I'm the genie, but the last guy wished to swap outfits."
Susan F. Breitman, West Hartford, Conn.

"I grant you one wish, in triplicate."
John Konno, Tokyo, Japan

THE WINNING CAPTION

"Oh, my God! My butt is huge."
James Flaherty, Oakville, Ont.

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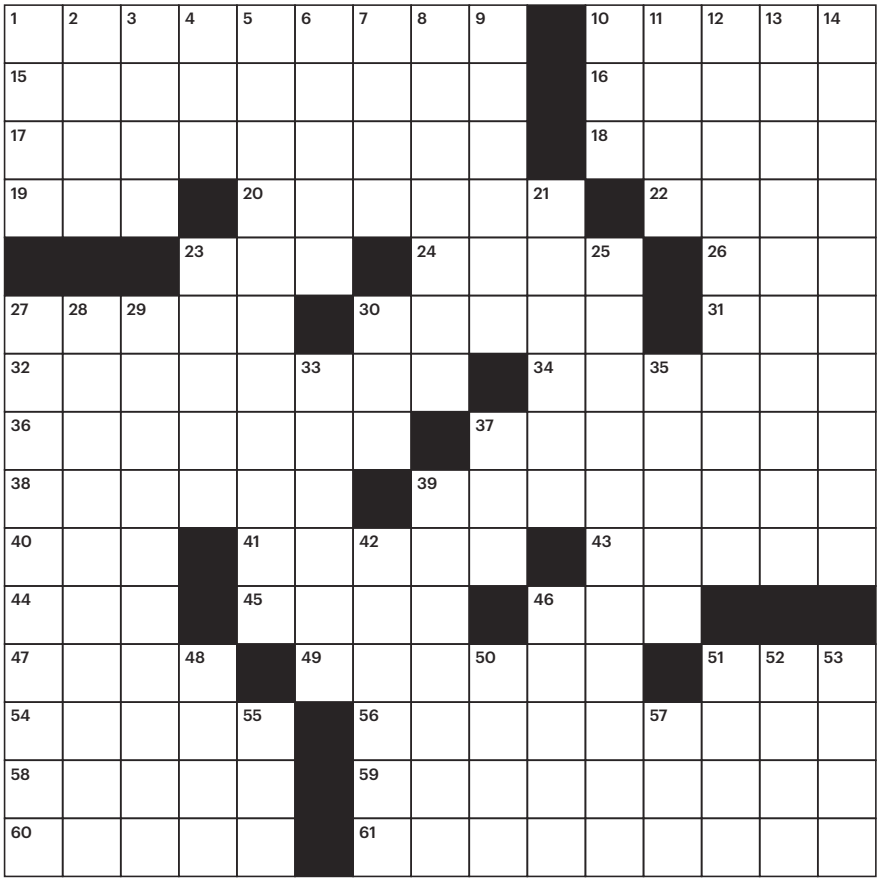
THE CROSSWORD

A challenging puzzle.

BY KAMERON AUSTIN COLLINS



ACROSS

1 Recovery practice following some B.D.S.M. play

10 Chain that dropped "Juice" from its name in 2019

15 One put out by a new flame

16 Arrive from out of town, perhaps

17 Device applied after Tommy John surgery

18 Props

19 Some E.R. workers

20 On cloud nine

22 Term in a statistics class

23 Atlas lines: Abbr.

24 Former Starbucks C.E.O. ___ C. Smith

26 "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" poet Scott-Heron

27 Adrift

30 Exercise that strengthens the glutes

31 "Origin" director DuVernay

32 Giving the finger?

34 Treated maliciously

36 Sprang about

37 Volcanic depression

38 Secure

39 Stripped-down philosophy?

40 Actress and documentarian Grant

41 Peripatetic person

43 Positions

44 High point of a European vacation

45 Exam for B-school hopefuls

46 Coach

47 "Please ___ . . ." (infamous appeal for support during a 2016 campaign event)

49 Canine protection

51 Bad actor

54 Brought on

56 Pre-installed programs that can hog memory

58 Harmoniously

59 American business

60 Bridal path

61 Climbs the ladder, so to speak

DOWN

1 Cracked

2 Plant that lacks both seeds and flowers

3 Scottish caps

4 Second City lines

5 High-wire act

6 Does some weeding

7 Green section of a Risk board

8 Let

9 Non-resident worker

10 1991 conspiracy thriller set in New Orleans

11 Reunion invitee

12 Excuse for missing work?

13 Having variety in life?

14 Depicter of the American West

21 Attempts to probe

23 *Palacio* resident

25 Pinnacle

27 Birthplace of Dolly Parton

28 Pasta inspired by the shape of Venus' navel, according to legend

29 Boarding locations

30 Sonny boy

33 Subject of a scientific map

35 Elba onscreen

37 Sleazebag

39 Grammy winner Cole

42 Male carrier?

46 Surpasses

48 Spa service

50 *La petite* ___ (term for orgasm that references death)

51 Retain

52 Code opener

53 Blend

55 Stain

57 Babyish cry

Solution to the previous puzzle:

S	E	R	F	S	■	S	A	W	S	■	B	L	O	G
A	G	I	L	E	■	C	H	I	P	■	R	E	P	O
C	O	C	O	A	■	H	O	L	Y	W	A	T	E	R
■	■	H	O	W	S	M	Y	D	R	I	V	I	N	G
W	H	E	R	E	T	O	■	L	I	C	E	N	S	E
H	A	L	L	E	Y	■	M	I	N	K	■	■	■	■
I	L	I	A	D	■	L	O	N	G	S	F	O	R	■
P	O	E	M	■	P	A	N	G	S	■	A	L	I	T
■	S	U	P	P	L	I	E	S	■	B	U	D	G	E
■	■	■	■	L	A	D	Y	■	R	E	L	Y	O	N
S	H	A	N	A	N	A	■	B	A	R	T	E	R	S
H	O	L	E	I	N	T	H	E	W	A	L	L	■	■
I	N	G	E	N	E	R	A	L	■	T	I	L	D	A
R	O	A	D	■	R	A	I	L	■	E	N	E	M	Y
T	R	E	Y	■	S	P	R	Y	■	S	E	R	V	E

Find more puzzles and this week's solution at **newyorker.com/crossword**

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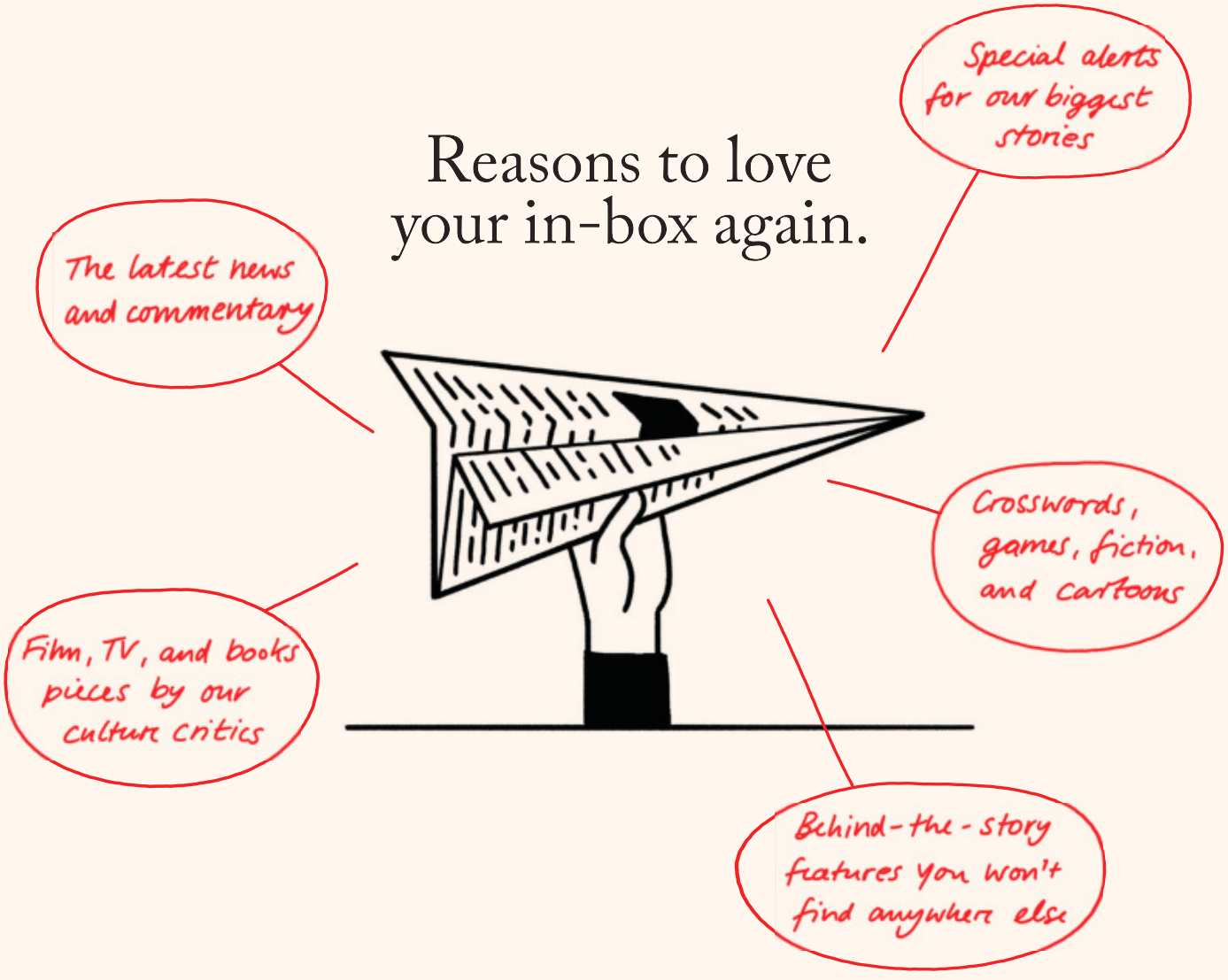
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